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**My Stepmom's
Daughter Is My Ex**
"The Only You in the World"

5



Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[The Ex-Girlfriend Hides Her Embarrassment](#)

[The Ex-Girlfriend Nurses Back to Health](#)

[Isana Higashira Will Not Be Led Astray](#)

[The Ex-Couple House-Sit](#)

[Commemoration](#)

[The Only You in the World](#)

[The Ex-Couple Confer](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus High Resolution Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

The Ex-Girlfriend Hides Her Embarrassment

“What is *wrong* with me?!”

Mizuto Irido

Yume was silently kneeling in front of a large, white gravestone with her hands clasped. I was amazed at how calm she was—personally, cemeteries made me uncomfortable. There was an air of tranquility that elicited strange feelings. I almost felt forced to face the emptiness inside me. We’d come here to pay respects to my mother, but I’d never met her. I wouldn’t have even known what she looked like if it wasn’t for dad’s pictures of her. Naturally, I didn’t know what she sounded like or what kind of personality she had either.

Children who lose their parents are pigeonholed as charity cases despite not feeling that way. I had to face this fact every time I came here. No wonder I’d never been a big fan of visiting her.

Yume probably felt the same. Sure, Yuni-san had a reason to be here as dad’s second wife, but Yume was just her daughter. She shouldn’t have had any thoughts or feelings whatsoever towards *my* mother. Despite that, Yume wore a very serious expression, as if she were actually conversing with her.

Suddenly, I thought back to that night at the deserted shrine. Her face had been lit up by the fireworks and then... I was still trying to figure out what that determined look in her eyes had meant. Was she trying to revert our relationship to how it used to be? In our current situation? She’d have to be insane. Just because something’s legal doesn’t mean you should do it. What would happen if we broke up again? What would happen if our parents found out?

If she really wanted us to get back together, why hadn’t she just come out and said so? But what would I have done? How would I have responded? What would I have wanted to do? I couldn’t sort out these emotions swirling around inside me. *Ugh, I feel sick.*

“We’re going to say hi to the chief priest,” dad said.

“You two stay here, ’kay?” Yuni-san followed up.

At the end of our visit to the temple, we were instructed to wait by the entrance. There was about a meter or so separating Yume and me. I looked up at the bright summer sky and lamented how awkward things were between us. Neither of us could bring ourselves to say a single word.

Things had always been weird, whether it was when we’d met, when we’d dated, or when we’d started living together. Maybe I’d just chosen to ignore that all this time. Had she done the same? Right now she was on her phone as if everything were normal.

I slowly shifted my gaze towards her, and our eyes met. She didn’t look away. She stared right at me. It was like I was back in that moment—her face lit by the fireworks, looking resolute. She looked like she desperately wanted to say something but couldn’t bring herself to do it.

You want me to ask? Really? If I do, are you gonna be okay if I answer too? My body stiffened, my throat felt dry, and I stopped blinking. My brain was no longer working, but even so, I pushed through and opened my mouth.

The moment I tried to say something, Yume averted her gaze.

Uh...what? She’d gone back to ignoring me and stared at her phone as if she’d completely lost interest in me. *Seriously, what is your deal?!*

Yume Irido

“What is *wrong* with me?!”

After our visit to the shrine, we returned home, and I promptly went to my room, jumped into bed, and screamed into my pillow. Why couldn’t anything go the way I wanted it to? Was my body actively working against me, or was it just this defective?

We’d been alone. Our eyes had met, but then I didn’t know what to say. My head had started spinning, my throat had closed up, and then the cherry on top? I’d looked away from him in an attempt to diffuse the entire situation!

It’d been like this ever since we’d returned from the family trip. I couldn’t

bring myself to talk to him. I couldn't even *look* at him! It was impossible to relax even in my own home. I still tried to keep up appearances so that our parents wouldn't feel like something was going on, but that didn't change the fact that he most likely thought I was giving him the cold shoulder.

Please believe me! I'm not trying to act distant! I wasn't lying when I'd internally declared that I'd steal his heart again. I wasn't lying, but after calming down and thinking about it...when had I ever stolen *anyone's* heart? Had I suddenly developed a silver tongue or something? Of course not! There was no way I could woo him with words alone. It was precisely because I couldn't use my words that I had resorted to writing a love letter back in middle school.

What the heck was I even supposed to do if I really wanted to try and make him fall for me again? All this time, we'd done nothing but exchange unpleasantries. How was I supposed to do a complete one-eighty and act like some sort of cute girl all of a sudden? I wanted to scream at myself. What had I been doing these past four and a half months?!

The first thing I needed to do was make him understand that my feelings towards our relationship had changed. *Ugh. Why didn't I tell him that after I kissed him?* Worst-case scenario, he could've said no, but that would've been fine. He'd already broken up with me once. Hearing him reject me again wouldn't have been all that painful.

If anything, that should've pushed me to take the initiative and go for it. I wasn't a great detective; I didn't need all the evidence before shooting my shot. Thinking that I did was nothing more than an excuse stemming from my own cowardice.

It wasn't too late. I could still salvage things. As long as I could tell him that I'd fallen in love with him again despite knowing full well that I could be rejected... As long as I could show him my feelings with my actions and words, I could chase away the ghost of my past self...or so I hoped.

Well...now isn't the best time. Our parents are home. Plus, we just finished visiting his mom's grave. Confessing right now would be kind of— Suddenly, my thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door.

"You in there?"

I softly shrieked. *M-Mizuto?!*

“Can I come in?”

“Y-Yeah. Sure, but— Wait, no. Nope. Nuh-uh. You can’t!”

“Okay, I’m coming in.”

“Wai—” I jumped off my bed and tried running to the door in an attempt to keep it closed, but it opened before I could get to it.

Mizuto narrowed his eyes. “Your hair’s a mess. Were you taking a nap or something?”

“Huh?” I ran to my vanity and fixed my hair while quickly sneaking glances at Mizuto’s reflection in the mirror, taking my time in order to calm down.

His arms were folded, and his weight was shifted onto one leg as he stared at me.

“So, what do you want?” I’d tried to recalibrate my voice to a calm tone, but I completely overshot it and made it sound super serious. *Agh, seriously?!*

“I just thought it’d be good to set things straight,” Mizuto said, leaning against the now closed door. “I don’t have any intention of beating around the bush with you.”

“Huh?”

“Tell me what that kiss was about.”

I froze. *H-Huh? What did he just ask? A kiss can only mean one thing!*

Mizuto slowly approached me. “Was it because the mood was right? Or was there some other reason? Your eyes made it look like you were throwing down the gauntlet. None of it makes sense.”

Mizuto grabbed my shoulder and forcibly turned me around to face him. Our eyes met. I fixated first on his long eyelashes, and then his eyes, which were piercing my own as if he could see right through me.

“If you’ve got something to say, spit it out,” he said.

Like it’s that easy! If I were able to “spit it out,” I wouldn’t be in such an agonizing situation to begin with. *Also, how dare he even consider that my once-*

in-a-lifetime bold kiss was nothing more than a spur-of-the-moment action! I hadn't just been caught up in the moment! Also, can you stop moving your face closer to mine?! I can't handle how hot you are! You're going to make me want to kiss you again! Wait, do you want me to, or not?!

I felt like my head was overheating as it tried to deal with the swell of embarrassment and desire. But finally, after a few agonizing moments, I could speak.

"I..."

"Yeah?"

"I lost my balance!!!" I screamed. *What am I even saying?! "H-How could you misread the situation? Our lips barely even touched! It's not the first time they've touched either. It shouldn't even bother you! Also, can you not shift all the blame onto me?! I really hated that about you!"* I panted, out of breath, my shoulders heaving from this explosion of words.

I tried taking deep breaths to regain my composure, and as I did, I realized how much I'd just messed up. Mizuto stood there in silence before letting go of me. *Oh. W-Wait. No, that's not what I meant.*

"Got it," he said, devoid of emotion. "Sorry for misinterpreting things." He didn't say another word as he left my room, leaving me completely alone in stunned silence.

I crashed on my bed, losing the strength in my body. *Oops, I did it again.*

Mizuto Irido

"Dammit..."

My chest was filled with a whirlwind of negative emotions. Cursing was the one way I felt I could relieve that pressure, if only a little. She claimed that she'd lost her balance. If that's the reality she wanted, then whatever. Whether it was an accident or not, the fact that we were siblings wouldn't change, nor would the fact that our relationship in middle school hadn't worked out and we'd broken up. *Yeah, I'm fine. I'm perfectly fine with all of this!*

In the midst of my frustration, my phone started vibrating. It was Higashira.

“Hello?” I asked, answering the phone.

“Greetings. Please allow me to enter your abode.”

Oh, right. We have plans today. I went downstairs and opened the front door.

“Mizuto-kun!”

“Wha—”

As soon as I opened the door, Higashira flung her arms around my neck and hugged me. This caught me so off guard that I staggered back a little from her sudden attack. Then I gently patted her head, as a parent would a child’s.

“You’re like a dog that hasn’t seen their master in a while,” I remarked.

“It has been far too long! You’ve no idea how lonely I’ve been during your absence. I feared I might perish from loneliness.”

“You’re not a rabbit, so that wouldn’t happen. Also, can you start using the intercom to let me know when you get here?”

“I refuse! I’m frightened of the possibility of anyone but you answering the door.”

“It’s scarier when a sixty-kilogram body tackles you out of nowhere,” I retorted.

“Are you referring to me?!”

“Don’t you remember proudly telling me how much your chest weighs? I figured you’d be around sixty total, taking that into account.”

“N-No matter the size of the chest, there is absolutely no effect on body weight!” Higashira turned her head away, pouting.

I patted her head again, her soft strands of hair passing between my fingers. As I did, I felt myself calm down. It was as if all the negative emotions inside me had been washed away.

“I’ll never doubt animal therapy again.” I didn’t really want a pet, but I could definitely see the benefits.

“I’m not sure what you mean, but I can’t help feeling that you’ve likened me to an animal.”

I led Higashira through the house so we could go up to my room, but just as we passed the living room...

"Mizuto? Is that Higashira-san?" dad asked.

"Yeah, we'll be in my room."

"Hi there, Higashira-san! I'll bring up some snacks later," Yuni-san chimed in.

"O-Oh, you don't need to..." she said in such a soft voice that they probably didn't hear.

Both dad and Yuni-san had completely approved of Higashira, but she was still uncomfortable around them. We went upstairs and walked into my room. As soon as we did, she acted as if it were her own and plopped down on my bed.

"Phew."

"You're acting like you're coming home after a long trip."

"I'm unable to sleep without your pillow."

"Then how do you sleep at all?" I asked as I watched her roll around on my bed. As she did, I picked up a wrapped box from my desk and presented it to her. "Higashira. Here."

"Hm?" She rolled over to face me after seeing the box in front of her. "What does this contain...? A bomb?"

"Why is terrorism your first thought? It's just something I got you on my trip."

"Oh, a souvenir!" she exclaimed, sitting up. Her eyes were sparkling with excitement as she took the box from me.

"I just bought a random snack from the station. Share it with your family."

"This is the first souvenir I've ever received from a friend."

"Thought as much. Enjoy those calories."

"I will! I will spread this among my family members, inflicting them with weight gain as well!"

"That sounds like terrorism."

I sat next to her as she swayed back and forth with happiness. I considered

talking about my trip, but I couldn't think of anything to say. I'd essentially been holed up in that study, reading the entire time.

"So..." Higashira started, breaking me out of my thoughts.

"Hm?"

She put the box down on her lap and inspected my bookshelf. "What did I help calm you down from? Have you encountered some sort of hardship?"

"Uh... Are you asking because you want to give me advice?"

"No, this is pure curiosity."

"That makes sense." I couldn't imagine her coming up with constructive ways to overcome problems. "I'm not having any hardships. Just some problems with Yu—my little stepsister." I'd almost used her first name but held back, because it still felt kind of weird to do so in front of others. "She ignores me and gets mad when I try to talk to her. It's like she's in her rebellious phase or something."

"Oh, I see."

"Yep. You've totally lost interest."

"I feel terrible, since I was the one who brought up the subject in the first place."

"You could at least pretend to care."

"Oh, if only I could. Many of my problems would be solved," Higashira lamented.

"How about you start by giving me your take on the situation."

"My take? Hm... Perhaps she's on her period?"

"Wow. You jumped straight to the worst possible answer."

"Yume-san's emotions are relatively unstable in general. During your trip, we spoke over the phone. She informed me of your first love."

"My what? Oh, Madoka-san. So not only does she misunderstand things, she also spreads that misinformation to others?"

“Misinformation?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, what a shame. I was quite infatuated with the adorable image of a young Mizuto-kun falling head over heels for someone.”

“I can see the gears in your head turning. Whatever you’re imagining is just a delusion of your own design, got it?”

“Oh, the image of a young, flustered Mizuto-kun as he partakes in a bath with an older lady is quite...”

“All right, well, if I *had* bathed with Madoka-san, she would’ve been pretty young too. There’s not much of an age difference between us.”

“That is quite titillating in its own right!”

Higashira was obviously getting worked up based on the way she was panting heavily. “But emotionally unstable, huh? Yeah, you have a point,” I said, trying to steer the conversation back on course.

“I do, don’t I?!” she exclaimed proudly. “Her emotional state is almost like a roller-coaster.”

“Anyone’s emotional state’s like a roller-coaster compared to yours.”

“Hm? I don’t perceive myself as that calm of a person.”

“It’s okay, Higashira. Nobody has an objective grasp of who they really are.”

“Is that so? Regardless, I believe I have quite severe emotional crashes.”

“You do? You brushed off getting rejected like it was nothing.”

“I was merely able to bounce back quickly. Similarly, I believe Yume-san too will regain her composure. Until then, allow me to help calm you.” Higashira poked my cheek.

This is getting annoying. Reflexively, I grabbed her cheeks with both my hands and began stretching them.

“S-Stop! You’re ruining my beautiful face!”

“That could never happen. You’re cute...in an octopus kinda way,” I said,

making sure the last bit was under my breath.

“I heard that! It is clear that you are toying with my purity—my pure heart as an innocent maiden!”

“That’s a harsh way to put it. Sorry. We’re friends, aren’t we?”

“I don’t think we can stay friends if you make statements like that!” Higashira angrily kicked her legs.

I continued to play with her as if she was a toy. I could feel my stress melting away.

Yume Irido

My mind was in tatters after hearing the snippets of conversation through my wall.

“...That could never happen. You’re cute...”

“...Trying to play with my purity, are you...?”

“...Sorry...”

“...I don’t think we can stay friends...”

Huh? That’s Higashira-san...right? Did Mizuto call her cute? He of all people was playing with her purity? Why couldn’t they stay friends?! No way... Suddenly my mind jumped to a certain conclusion in which Mizuto was gently holding a naked Higashira-san against his bed. *Have they really crossed that line?!*

Why? Why? Why?! Was it because they hadn’t seen each other for a while? Or was it because of my earlier screw-up? Maybe he’d given up on me and decided to go for Higashira-san instead?

No, wait. I need to calm down. Don’t do this. Don’t jump to conclusions. I needed to not blow things out of proportion, especially when I didn’t have any evidence to support my worst fears. I hadn’t heard their conversation clearly in the first place. I had to have misunderstood something. *Wow, I’ve really grown.* I wasn’t about to repeat the same mistakes of the past that’d made Mizuto and I fall out.

“Okay.” Ultimately, I decided to check things out for myself.

I needed more information to make an informed decision about what was going on. What was better than going straight to the source? Sure, I was a little nervous, but I shouldn’t have been. It was Mizuto and Higashira-san. They weren’t the type to engage in those kinds of activities. All my misunderstandings would be dispelled the minute I looked inside.

Let’s do this. I quietly left my room and tiptoed down the hall. *All I have to do is open the door a little and peek inside. I’m not being a creeper.* As *his* sister and *her* friend, it fell to me to check on things between them.

I gripped the doorknob. My heart was beating in my ears—I couldn’t hear anything else. I slowly turned the doorknob when suddenly, I heard a thud loud enough that I could feel it in my bones, enough to make me hesitate. But when I looked inside...



Through the small crack in the door, I saw Higashira-san on the ground, her eyes closed, and Mizuto over her with a tender expression on his face. Everything started to feel like it was getting fuzzy. I couldn't see straight.

"Oh, my!" a voice rang out behind me, snapping me out of my daze.

Mizuto and Higashira looked towards the door and I looked behind me. Standing there was mom, holding a tray of snacks. She peeked inside the room and in the next moment, a grin spread across her face.

"I was about to bring some snacks, but I don't want to interrupt. I'll be back later. Have fun!"

"Wai— Yuni-san, wait!" Mizuto called out to stop her, but it was too late.

She'd already skipped away down the stairs, practically singing about what she'd seen. I, meanwhile, was left alone.

My eyes met Mizuto's, and I only had one thing to say.

"Have fun..."

"Hey, wait!"

He tried to stop me, but I ran back to my room.

I sniffled. It seemed that I'd lost today. It'd been a short battle that hadn't even lasted two days, but I hadn't expected Higashira-san to be a combatant. I truly hadn't thought that the two of them had any intention of doing those kinds of things with each other. But still, I hadn't expected to be proven wrong so easily...

I thought I knew what kind of guy he was. I'd never expected him to take a girl to his room for *that* purpose, especially after *just* getting kissed by someone else two freaking days ago! How could he have been so insensitive?! He hadn't ever been this forward when *we* were dating! How could he do it so easily with Higashira-san?! *I hate you! You stupid closet perv! You horny beast! You big boob lover!*

I couldn't suppress my emotions. Before I realized it, I was calling someone. It was none other than the friend I'd talked to the most over the phone with since

entering high school.

“Hello?! Yume-chan, are you back home? I missed you!!!”

“A-Akatsuki-sannn...” I wailed through sniffles.

“Huh? What? Who is this? A zombie?”

Mizuto Irido

“Well, they certainly misunderstood what occurred. Heh heh.”

“Stop looking so happy,” I snapped at Higashira.

I’d never heard her sound so happy. I was genuinely surprised she could sound like this.

“They are fully under the impression that we were in the midst of going all the way,” Higashira crowed, still lying down as she excitedly kicked her legs against my bed. “The next time they see us, they’re going to perceive us in a new, mature light.”

“Can you *not* get enjoyment out of someone else’s misery? Can’t you tell how shitty this situation is for me?! You get to leave, but I *live* here! Do you know what it’s like for your family members to walk on eggshells around you?!”

“It’ll be all right. There will be no problem so long as we explain the situation. For now, let’s fully indulge in this fake emotional high!”

“So you *do* know it’s fake.”

“Real, fake, it doesn’t matter to me either way.” Even though she was lying down, there was a very pronounced mound on her chest. *Is her bra keeping her boobs in place and in that shape? Like, is gravity not affecting them?*

Higashira looked at me as if she wanted to beg me for something. “Isn’t this pose erotic? I am lying here completely defenseless, you know.”

“Mm-hmm. Totally.”

“Hmph! It would behoove you to at least *attempt to* bolster the pride of a woman, even if it’s only once in a blue moon.”

Do you even have that kind of pride? Suddenly, my phone started buzzing. A phone call? From Minami-san?

“Hello?”

“You certainly seem to be having the time of your life!” *Is this a new way to say hello?* “How nice of you to dive right into things! Are you maybe taking a quick break? Or maybe are you about to start up again? Be honest. How bad do you want to hang up this call and get back to it? You must be *itching* to get back to Higashira-san’s huge tits! No wonder you didn’t immediately pounce on me when I tried seducing you!”

“Okay, let’s take a step back and calm down,” I said, not knowing what was going on.

“Mizuto-kun, what do you think about me being face down like this?” Higashira asked.

“You’re doing it from behind next?!” I heard Minami-san screech on the other side of the phone.

“Higashira! Zip it!” She was not helping calm down Minami-san, who’d gone into berserk mode. I needed to explain. Yume had probably called her for help and spread misinformation again.

“Do you know *why* I’m angry?” Minami-san asked.

“I’d rather you ask Kawanami that question.”

“I haven’t been able to see Yume-chan at all these past few days because of your family trip. I was wondering if I’d get a call from her since I knew you’d be back today. I was so anxious, and when I finally *did* get that call, I had to listen to her complain and complain about how well your friend was getting along with your family. Do you understand how I feel? Do you?!”

“I am so sorry.” I couldn’t believe the situation I’d landed into. How could she have spread the news this fast? She was spreading it faster than the flu!

“So what’s the deal? Did you do it with her?” Minami-san asked suspiciously.

Actually, it might have been best that a third party was involved. “Of course not. Higashira tripped on a book and I tried to stop her from falling.”

“Let me guess, you weren’t able to support her weight so you fell with her. That’s so cliché.”

“Yeah, that’s the problem. It’s cliché so it’s hard to believe.”

“True. Honestly, I totally do think that you’re making it up.”

“Figures.” I’d think the same if I were in her shoes.

“Let me talk to Higashira-san.”

“Fine. I’ll put you on speaker.” I pointed my phone towards Higashira.

She looked up from the book she was reading. “Oh, Minami-san. Greetings!”

“Yeah, it’s been a while. So about Irido-kun pushing you down and mounting you—”

“Heh heh heh. I’m so embarrassed...”

“Okay, yeah, I don’t believe you, Irido-kun.”

“Stop messing around, Higashira!” I snapped at her. *Stop acting like you’ve climbed the stairway to adulthood.*

She stopped squirming around in my bed and began telling the truth. “I am frightened of Mizuto-kun, so I will come clean. I have retained my purity. As usual, he has not laid a single finger on me.”

“Is he gay? If I were him, I’d probably already have two children with you.”

“Heh heh, there’d be so many mouths to feed. We’d be in bad financial straits.”

“Can you two *please* stick to the topic?” Why was my strong will to resist being criticized? “You understand now that this has all been one big misunderstanding, right? Could you tell her that, Minami-san?”

“What? Why me?”

“Why *not* you?”

“You should be the one to explain.” I heard a crunching noise from the other side of the phone. Was she eating a snack? “If anything, I’d have everything to gain from her continuing to misunderstand. You know why, right?”

“Yeah...”

Higashira tilted her head, not knowing the history with Minami-san and me, like how she'd wanted to marry me to become Yume's sister-in-law and all. Higashira had no clue how fixated Minami-san was on Yume. From what I could tell, after everything that happened with Higashira and Kawanami, she'd ditched her original plan to marry me, but she was still very much into Yume. Of course, with Minami-san's goal being Yume, there was no reason for her not to drive a wedge between the two of us.

“But, you know,” she said before there was another loud crunch, “You did make Yume-chan cry. I'm not especially forgiving of guys who leave it to others to cheer a girl up. Understand?”

“Huh...?” No, I didn't understand. What was she talking about? “She was...crying?”

“Yep. It sounded like she was crying pretty hard. The first thing I heard when I picked up the phone was her bawling. Can you imagine how I fel—” I blocked out the rest of what she was saying because I wanted to think.

She'd been crying? And it was because she saw Higashira and me in that position? This made it seem as if she'd been in shock. But that didn't make sense. *She's been ignoring me and verbally abusing me, but now she's...sad? What's going on?*

I deeply exhaled and stood up. I handed my phone to Higashira as Minami-san continued to ramble on about her complaints.

“Higashira, sorry, but can you talk to her for a bit?”

“Are you going?”

“Yeah,” I said as I walked to the door. “I need to talk to her.”

Yume Irido

I let out a yawn. I wondered how I could have fallen asleep. All I remembered was complaining to Akatsuki-san about everything, feeling tired all of a sudden, and then... Well, either way, I felt a lot better after my nap. Or maybe it was

thanks to my conversation with Akatsuki-san. *I should thank her.* How long had I slept?

And most importantly...was Higashira-san still in his room?

Suddenly, I heard a knock on my door, prompting me to cry out in surprise. The knock was familiar, though. After all, I'd already heard it once today.

"I'm coming in."

"N-No! Nuh-uh! Absolutely not! Seriously, don't!"

I sprang out of bed and just barely made it to the door in time to block Mizuto from coming in. *Why the heck would you try to come in before I said you could?!*

"Wh-What do you need?" I asked.

"I'll tell you after you let me in."

"N-Not now!"

"Why not?"

What do you mean "Why not"?! Maybe because I just finished crying my eyes out and messed my hair up after taking a nap?! I'm not ready to be perceived!

"C-Can you just wait a minute? Seriously, just one minute!"

I ran to my vanity, fixed my hair, and used makeup to cover up any sign that I'd been crying. *O-Okay, I think I'm fine now.* As long as he wasn't too close, there shouldn't be any way for him to tell.

"You good now?"

"Y-Yeah, I am."

The doorknob clicked as it turned. *Hm? Wait. No, I'm not.* I may have fixed my appearance, but I wasn't in the right state of mind to see him. How was I supposed to look him in the eye after what he'd been doing with Higashira-san?! I'd realized this too late, however. He'd already stepped inside.

He looked as expressionless as always. *How can you act so normally after you were just all over Higashira-san's huge chest?!* I leered at him from the edge of my bed, eliciting a heavy sigh from him.

"How many times do I have to come into your room today? I would've

preferred to have kept it to one.”

“What’s your problem? *You’re* the one forcing your way in.”

“Because you keep making me.”

“Huh?”

How’s this my fault? I didn’t know why he’d come here, but I *did* know what he’d been doing in his room. But...he hadn’t done anything wrong. They both liked each other, so it was okay. If anything, I shouldn’t have been so bothered. It was bound to happen one day since our rooms were next to each other.

“Okay, stop. I can tell what you’re thinking, and it’s not even remotely correct,” Mizuto said, breaking me out of my thoughts.

“Huh?”

Mizuto sat down on my carpet and continued talking with a calm expression. “This has all been a misunderstanding. Higashira and I weren’t doing anything.”

“Huh?” My eye twitched. *He’s trying to defend himself? Why?* It was disrespectful to Higashira-san to try and pretend like their relationship was anything other than what it actually was. “What exactly am I misunderstanding? You pushed Higashira-san to the ground!”

“I lost my balance.”

“Huh?!” Not only was he lying to me, but he used the same excuse that I’d blurted out earlier?! “Who would believe such a flimsy excuse?! Can’t you come up with something a little more believable?”

“Oh, so losing one’s balance isn’t a good excuse?”

“Ugh.” My chickens were coming home to roost. But I’d been lying when I said it...

“I’m not making this up; I really *did* lose my balance. Higashira tripped over a book. I tried to catch her, but I wasn’t strong enough to support her weight. Also, why would I push her down on the hard floor when I have a perfectly good, soft bed?”

I groaned. Everything he said made sense. His bed *was* right there. It made no

sense for him to go out of his way to push her to the floor instead. So maybe I *had* been jumping to conclusions.

“Despite how much you like mystery novels, your observation skills are awful.”

“Ugh.”

“You couldn’t even be Watson. I bet you’d suggest there was an elaborate trick behind every single crime.”

“Urgh.”

“If you were a character in the book, everyone would know that the crime was committed by some kind of gimmick as soon as you showed up. You know what, you’re as annoying as the advertisements for Yukito Ayatsuji’s *Mansion Murder* series. They’re always using clickbait to stir up interest. ‘You won’t believe how this one sentence changed their entire world.’ So stupid.”

Clickbait? Rude! Also, I’d actually like to read about that kind of character!
“Wh-What’s your problem? Are you trying to imply that you felt nothing?!”

“Huh?”

“Even if you *did* lose your balance, she’s still really cute, and her boobs are huge! Plus, how can you *not* think about...*things* when a girl who’s openly in love with you is underneath you?!”

I had no right to say any of this. Even if he had felt something while he was on top of her, I had no right to comment on it at all. I knew that, but I couldn’t stop the word vomit. “I bet you were thinking about how lucky you were or how you might’ve been able to cop a feel in the confusion. Are you really telling me that there wasn’t even a small part of you that was thinking that?! Can you really say that with a straight fa—”

“I wasn’t thinking about any of that at all.” Mizuto was clear with his words. “Seriously, I wasn’t. If anything, I was worried that she might’ve hit her head.”

“You’re just trying to make yourself look good...”

“No, I’m trying to tell the truth.”

“Then prove it.” I knew I was asking for the impossible. I knew I was the

world's most annoying woman. "Prove to me that pushing a girl down like that doesn't faze you at all. After that, I'll believe—"

"Okay." Mizuto stood up and approached me. *Huh?* "You want proof, right?"

"Wai—" But I didn't have time to protest before he grabbed me by the arm and pushed me down against my soft bed.

Mizuto's head blocked the bright light shining down on us. His slender hands pressed my arms against the sheets. His knees sandwiched my legs between them. I could feel his warm breath against my face, melting the words frozen inside my throat.

"You don't...feel anything?" I asked.

"I don't."

"Really?"

"Really."

"You're lying..."

"I'm not."

No, you're lying. I know you are. You're definitely lying! My head felt like it was about to explode as memories of that night a few days ago resurfaced. My body yearned for the emotions and sensations of that moment.

"Are your arms tired?" I asked, looking straight into his eyes. "You're not about to lose your balance, are you?" If Mizuto really didn't feel anything in this situation, then his incident with Higashira-san must have truly been an accident—something beyond his control. He had no reason to apologize or act any differently.

"Hey..."

I couldn't bring myself to respond to his soft voice. Instead, I gently touched his arms. If I pushed around the elbows, he'd definitely lose his balance. Things were okay as they were right now, but even so, I...

"Mizuto-kun? Yume-san?! I heard some yelling. Are you two—"

I heard the door open. Higashira-san had entered without even knocking.

What followed was a mutual silence between the three of us, all frozen in place. It took about ten seconds before Higashira-san slowly backed up and began closing the door behind her.

“P-Please take your time...” she said politely.

“I lost my balance!”

“He lost his balance!”

The two of us desperately yelled before she could shut the door.

“Phew, that certainly caught me by surprise.”

I’d sent Mizuto back to his room while I desperately tried to correct this misunderstanding with Higashira-san. I needed him out of the room because I wasn’t confident I could keep calm with him around.

But also...was it *really* a misunderstanding? Well, it’d probably be best to leave it that way. Surprisingly, Higashira-san readily accepted my explanation.

“When I opened the door, everything suddenly made sense. I began to understand why I’d been rejected.”

“O-Oh. I see...” I looked away from her.

“Then I began pondering about how disingenuous of you it would have been if, despite having feelings for him, you had assisted me with my confession. Quite perplexing, you see.”

“O-Oh, yeah. That’d be crazy.” I still couldn’t make eye contact with her.

“But then I felt like, if you two were together in that sort of manner, I’d be okay with it.”

“Huh?”

“But it was all my misunderstanding! It simply caught me off guard.”

Wait, no. This isn’t over. You said something I can’t accept. “Wh-What do you mean you’d be okay with it? I thought you liked Mizuto.”

“Huh? I believe I’ve previously stated I wouldn’t mind if Mizuto-kun got a girlfriend.”

“Yeah, I remember that, but...”

“However, I suppose it depends on who his partner is. If he began relations with some wanton woman, I don’t think I’d approve.”

“True...”

“In that regard, I’d be perfectly okay if it was you, Yume-san. Dating a stepsibling no doubt brings a lot of difficulties, but that wouldn’t concern me.” Higashira-san giggled.

“But wouldn’t it bother you that I’d helped with your confession despite being in a relationship with him?”

“That would depend on the situation. For example, perhaps you knew that dating your stepsibling was not feasible, so you wished for him to have a girlfriend he could openly date.” *How is she so perceptive?! Can you share some of that with me?!* “However, this is all hypothetical because this has all been a misunderstanding, right?”

“Y-Yeah. Exactly. Mizuto and I aren’t romantically involved. Not in the slightest.”

“I understand. Romance between stepsiblings isn’t very common.”

True, it wasn’t common. But...I was surprised that Higashira-san wouldn’t mind if we dated. She’d be supportive.

“Higashira-san...”

“Hm? Y-Yume-san?”

I hugged Higashira-san. “I really want you to find happiness.”

“I’m already plenty happy.” She giggled. “If my life were a novel, I would have achieved my happy ending already.”

I need to be more like you. How can I do that? Would I simply need to tell Mizuto how I felt, have him accept my feelings, and return to being a couple? Would that be enough? Would I be able to surpass my past self like that?

Mizuto Irido

Higashira walked back into my room after talking with Yume. She let out a very satisfied snort.

“I’ve completed flirting with Yume-san.”

“Good for you.”

“Thank you!”

She always seemed to be enjoying herself. How nice would it have been if I could live even a little like her without constantly being dragged down by my own baggage. But then I thought back to Yume and what she’d wanted in that moment in her room. *Did she want me to lose my balance? Should I have?*

It might have been okay legally, and maybe even with Higashira too. Nothing was holding me back—except my own feelings.

I rubbed Higashira’s soft hair around her ears, being sure not to mess it up.

“Do you need something?” she asked, turning to look at me.

“Therapy.”

“Oh, then by all means.”

I felt the warmth of her skin as I ran my hands through her hair.

“Higashira,” I called out to my best friend.

“Yes?”

“I might come to you for really important advice one day.”

Higashira blinked at me. “Oh, what an honor! I will do my best,” she said in her usual carefree tone.

“Oh, it’s already gotten this late? I should take my leave.”

“I’ll walk you partway.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I don’t mind every so often. It’s been a while since we’ve hung out too.”

“O-Okay then!” Higashira giggled.

I walked down the stairs with the ecstatic Higashira. As I did, I couldn't shake off the feeling I was forgetting something. We walked past the living room. The door was open.

"Oh, Higashira-san, are you going home?" Yuni-san ran up to us, a broad smile across her face.

Dad glanced at us from behind her.

"Did you rest up enough? Can you get home okay? Do you want to eat dinner before you go? You could even stay over if you'd li—" Yuni-san continued interrogating, closing in on Higashira.

"I-It's quite all right. I will be leaving."

"Oh, okay. If you say so."

Hm? Why is she so concerned?

Yuni-san glanced at me and then leaned over and whispered in my ear. "Mizuto-kun. Let us know in advance when she's coming over, okay?"

"Huh?"

"We'll make sure to leave the house empty for you two. We'll even bring Yume along with us, okay?"

Why would she have to do all that— Oh. A cold sweat ran down my body. I'd completely forgotten that she'd seen me and Higashira on the ground too.

Yuni-san gripped Higashira's hand and smiled from the bottom of her heart. "Congratulations! Please keep taking care of Mizuto-kun!"

"Y-Yes, of course. Thank...you?"

I was facing a big problem other than my own feelings. My parents had been under the impression that Higashira was my ex, but that had probably changed as of today. In their minds, she'd become my girlfriend. I only found out that this information had spread like wildfire across our entire family in the past few hours thanks to a message Madoka-san sent to Yume.

The Ex-Girlfriend Nurses Back to Health

“Is it true catching someone else’s cold will make them feel better?”

Yume Irido

Here’s a one-sentence summary of the events up until now: I screwed up everything.

“Hey, do you know where the cup I left here went?” I asked.

“I took it to the sink,” Mizuto replied.

“Why? I was still using it.”

“How was I supposed to know? Maybe try not leaving it somewhere random next time.”

“Excuse me?”

“Hmph.”

Witness the conversation between two people who’d kissed just a few days ago. We were supposed to be on better terms after getting used to living with each other, but we were back where we’d started: hating each other’s guts.

I didn’t even need to ask how things had ended up this way. I knew. But still, was I really the only one to blame? All I’d been doing was hiding my embarrassment. I’d fallen back into old habits in an attempt to deal with the embarrassing reason I had for kissing him.

But then all that stuff happened with Higashira-san, bringing me to this turbid emotional state. I could feel myself being even meaner to him than I had been before summer vacation started. *Ugh, but this isn’t what I wanted! This isn’t how it’s supposed to be!*

I was supposed to be taking the lead—teasing him and making his face go red. He was supposed to be sheepish around me! I had to find some way to get

things back on track. Was my best way forward telling him it was all an act to cover my embarrassment? *No, it's too late for that.* If I showed weakness like that, I'd never be the one on top.

I glanced over from the couch as Mizuto poured water from the pitcher into a cup. I had to at least stop reflexively lashing out at him. Snapping back at him only made things worse. I was the type that learned from my mistakes. I implemented PDCA into my life—plan, do, check, adjust.

Suddenly, I heard something crash. I quickly turned towards the kitchen to see Mizuto looking down at the ground. I walked over to him and saw that the pitcher had fallen, spilling all the filtered water across the floor.

“A-Are you okay?”

Fortunately the pitcher was plastic, so there weren't any glass shards. He was probably fine, then.

Mizuto silently got a rag and crouched down to wipe up the water. I moved closer to help, but was promptly stopped. “Don't,” he said in a firm voice. “I can handle this myself.”

Even though I was right there, I couldn't do anything to help. *Do you... Do you really hate me that much? Sure, we broke up, so those negative feelings might still be there, but still... We loved each other once, didn't we? Do you really hate who I am now that much? Am I really that different from who I used to be?*

After he finished cleaning the floor, he refilled the pitcher and put it in the refrigerator. Then he walked past me without a single word. I watched as he left the living room and I noticed something. *He doesn't look too good.*

Mizuto Irido

I couldn't think straight. My body ached. My throat felt uncomfortable and dry. Breathing felt like torture. I was pretty sure I was sick. I crashed onto my bed after finally reaching my room. It'd been a while since I'd last caught a cold. Maybe I'd picked something up on our trip. I knew I shouldn't have gone to the festival.

She's okay though, right? I didn't give her my cold, did I? I tried to erase the feel of her lips from my memory as I crawled under the covers. The best thing I

could do now was rest and recover. This had been my routine ever since I was a kid.

Cold...? I felt something cold placed on my forehead, prompting me to wake up. My mind was hazy, my throat sore. I felt so lethargic. I guess I needed to sleep more. If I wanted to get better as fast as possible, I needed to fall asleep again. But one thing prevented me from doing so: I wanted to know what was on my forehead.

It felt like a cooling patch, but I had no recollection of putting one on. I slowly opened my eyes.

“Oh.” My vision was still hazy, but I saw a familiar face. She noticed that I’d woken up. “Are you okay?” she asked, looking closely at my face while moving her long black hair behind her ear.

She was acting like a normal family member. It made me doubt that I was actually awake. In fact, maybe I was still dreaming. She’d been in a bad mood and had been keeping her distance from me. But now, she looked like she was genuinely concerned about me.

“Can I get you anything? I brought you a sports drink. Do you want it?” she asked.

“Yeah...”

“Okay. Can you sit up?”

I slowly moved my body while Yume opened the bottle, poured the contents into a cup, and stuck a straw in it before bringing it to my mouth.

“I can drink by myself...”

“You’ll make things worse for yourself if you spill it. Just drink it like this, okay?” she insisted.

Still, I tried holding the cup as I drank from the straw while she supported it. I could feel the sweet, cold liquid flowing down my throat.

“You should’ve said that you weren’t feeling well,” Yume scolded. “What if your cold got worse? You’d ruin your summer vacation.”

“Shut it...”

“What’s with the attitude? Am I not allowed to take care of you?”

“I...” I still couldn’t think straight. The words naturally fell out of my mouth. “I was just scared...”

“Huh?”

I collapsed back onto my pillow. I must’ve tired myself out from talking.

“Are you going to sleep again? How’s your fever? Did you already take your temperature?”

I didn’t. As much as I wanted to say that out loud, I’d already passed back out.

Yume Irido

He really fell asleep. I took out the thermometer and began undoing the buttons on his shirt as he peacefully slept. I had to keep reminding myself that I *needed* to do this. I didn’t have any ulterior motives. I was doing this with *only* pure intentions.

I pulled back his shirt and saw his chest. My face felt hot. *Stop! This isn’t the time! Calm down! Stay cool!* I stuck the thermometer in his hairless armpit.

The thermometer beeped, snapping me back to my senses. I pulled it out. *That was close. Too close. I need to get a hold of myself. I shouldn’t be ogling a sick person.*

Then I saw the reading on the thermometer. Thirty-seven point nine degrees Celsius. It wasn’t too high of a temperature, but it wasn’t quite low enough to be normal. He’d probably be able to sleep it off.

“That’s a relief...”

If he stayed like this, I wasn’t sure if I could show the same kind of self-restraint that I’d demonstrated today. *Being aware of your feelings is scary.* I buttoned up his shirt and exhaled after it took every last fiber of my being to look away.

His words played over and over in my head as I stared at his face. What was he scared of? Had I been so harsh with my words to the point that he would talk

about it in his sleep? I wasn't trying to lash out at him on purpose!

But our relationship had already taken a turn for the worse, and we had failed to repair it. Just looking at each other triggered anger inside us. If he said something, I'd snap back at him. This had become our default.

I knew that things wouldn't go back to how they used to be just because I wanted them to. But then again, that shouldn't have been what I wanted. Why would I *want* things to go back to how they used to be? History would repeat, and we'd end up making the same mistakes that had led to our relationship's demise in the first place.

I wanted the current Mizuto to fall in love with my current self, just as I'd fallen for him. It might've been too much for me to wish for, but there was no other way for us to get back into a relationship. We weren't just a guy and a girl anymore—we were stepsiblings.

We weren't in a position to test the waters of what it'd be like to be a couple. But what should I do? If I tried to be honest with him, he'd put his guard up. I was fully aware of how much trust I'd made him lose in me.

Can he just fall in love with me on his own and ask me out without me having to lift a finger? These kinds of thoughts made me realize that I hadn't really matured. If anything I'd regressed past my middle school self.

"Maybe I should make him some rice porridge."

I'd never made it before, but as long as I followed any old recipe I found online, I'd probably be okay. I stood up and left Mizuto's room.

Mizuto Irido

I immediately knew I was dreaming.

"Do you want any water? Do you need help drinking it?"

Yume Irido was fawning over me as a mother would her child—thoroughly, selflessly, and lovingly. I *had* to be dreaming.

"I'll take your temperature. Lift your arm."

Why are you acting like this now? Nothing was going to change from this tender treatment. No matter how kind she acted—no matter how friendly we

acted towards each other—everything would come crumbling down from some kind of trivial disagreement. *That's how it's always been, right?*

People can't change who they are at their core. Neither of us had changed since we'd dated, and just like back then, one of us would inevitably encounter some trait of the other that we couldn't get past. The only question was: who would be the first to break? My guess was both of us, at the same time.

We'd stubbornly continue as if nothing was wrong despite the storm of emotions welling within us. By the time we'd realize things had worsened between us, it would be too late to even attempt to rectify the situation. We knew how it would end, so why go there? Why not just stay stepsiblings?

We were just getting to the point where we were finally able to put our past behind us, where our old emotions weren't dragging us down. *So why'd you have to go and do that?*

Whenever things looked like they would go well, they wouldn't. When we should've been happy, we weren't. Tomorrow isn't guaranteed to be as good as today. Our relationship was never anything but chaotic. Everything would always fall apart, bringing us back to square one. I'm sick of it.

Love is just a temporary lapse of judgment—a horrible dream shown to us by youth. *I never want to go through that again.*

I slowly opened my eyes to the ticking of my clock. Nobody else was around, but a sports drink sat on my nightstand. I slowly sat up and stretched my arms, which weren't as sore as they had been. My head didn't feel as heavy or hazy either.

I'd sweated a little, but maybe that was the price for my recovery. My throat still hurt a little, but overall it seemed like whatever cold I'd had was on the verge of passing. I chugged the rest of the drink and stood up. I didn't really want to be in bed anymore, so I left my room, went downstairs, and noticed that someone was in the kitchen. Curiously, I opened the door slightly.



“So...a tablespoon of salt. Wait, how much is a tablespoon?!”

Lo and behold, the head chef of literal Hell’s Kitchen herself. An apron-clad Yume stood at the stove, her hair tied into a neat ponytail. It may have *looked* like she knew her way around the kitchen, but her actions told a different story. She was seriously debating whether or not the mound of salt that she’d scooped out was actually the correct amount. *Do you have the culinary skills of an elementary schooler or something?*

“One tablespoon... Well, this fills it up entirely, so I think it should be fine.”

“Think again.”

“Huh?”

I grabbed her hand before she could dump in the mound of salt. Yume blinked at me in surprise.

“You’re feeling better already?” she asked.

“Did you even pay attention in home ec? You’re supposed to level it off, not heap it up.”

“Huh...? Really?”

I let go of her and went to the sink to wash my hands. Afterwards, I went back and used my finger to level the salt before pouring it into the pot full of rice. She’d left eggs to the side of the stove, which led me to conclude that she was most likely attempting to make rice porridge.

“Don’t do something you’re not used to while I’m asleep. What if you had started a fire?”

“I-I’m not *that* bad! I can at least make rice! I’ve done it by myself before!”

“Oh, right. I taught you how to do that. Good thing I did, otherwise you’d never know.”

“Urgh.” Yume looked away from me, frowning. “Shouldn’t you be praising me for trying my best? I *am* making it for you, after all...”

“Oh, I get it. Is having your patient worry their ass off part of your treatment plan?” I asked, staring at her.

“Nnngh!” Yume made a childish sound while glaring back at me.

I could tell she was annoyed that I’d recovered to the extent that I could throw insults at her. I was okay with that, though. This was the way it should be.

I went to the refrigerator and opened the vegetable drawer. “Were you seriously just gonna give me eggs and rice? Where are the nutrients? At least chop up some green onions,” I said, placing them on the cutting board.

“I-I’ll take care of it! You should rest more!”

“I’m more or less fine now. If anything, it’s better that I intervene now than be sent into a worse condition by your oversalted creation.”

“But you’re still recovering, so you should—”

“How about you crack the eggs? You can at least do that, right?”

“Of course I can! If you can be *this* mean, then you’ve recovered enough! Fine, I’ll crack the eggs, okay?! Will that make you happy?! I practiced, so I’ll be fine!”

Spoiler alert: she was *not* fine. When she went to crack the first egg over the mixing bowl in the sink, she lightly tapped it on the rim, making a small crack. She tilted her head in confusion, and tried cracking it again...and again. Predictably, the egg broke in her hand, and the yolk and eggshell spilled out. She frantically tried to pick out the shards.

Yeah, I can’t let someone this clumsy handle a knife. I continued chopping the green onions. If I left her to her own devices, I could foresee my condition getting worse.

After beating the eggs, I poured them in a circle over the rice before sprinkling the green onions on top. Presto—rice porridge. When I went to carry the pot, though, Yume rushed in and scolded me, saying that she was worried I’d drop it. She swiped it away from me.

Truthfully, I *wasn’t* really back at a hundred percent; it was within the realm of possibility that I’d drop the pot. As much as I hated to admit it, in terms of risk, she was right, so I didn’t argue with her and let her take care of it. Instead, I put a trivet on the dining table for the pot. Then she grabbed bowls for the both

of us and placed them across the table from one another.

“You’re having some too?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m curious how it turned out.”

The sun hadn’t set yet even though it was seven in the evening, aka dinner time, and Yume had apparently forgotten to make her own meal. I doubted it would be all that filling for someone who wasn’t sick.

She was completely oblivious to this fact and proceeded to fill our bowls before realizing...

“Oh, I forgot our chopsticks. Or wait, would a spoon be better?” she muttered to herself before getting up and grabbing spoons for both of us and sitting back down. She put her hands together and proceeded to dig in. *Even without our parents around, she’s so polite.* “Hot!” she exclaimed as soon as she brought the spoon into her mouth. *What an idiot.*

“Why didn’t you wait for it to cool down?”

“I-It’s better when it’s hot!” she argued. But contrary to her words, she proceeded to blow on her food a few times before eating it.

My guess? She was hungry and couldn’t wait. Anything further than that, I decided not to think about. There wasn’t any point in thinking about a girl who’d try to cook while she was hungry when she had little to no experience.

Yume slowly brought the spoon to her mouth and bit down. “It’s good...”

After blowing on the rice enough for it to cool down, I brought the spoon to my mouth and took a bite. After a few seconds, I gave my opinion. “The rice is watery. You probably put in too much when you made it.”

“S-Sorry...”

“Rice porridge needs to be a little watery though, so it’s fine.” I took another bite. Fortunately, I was hungrier than usual. Seeing me shovel spoon after spoon into my mouth elicited a smile of first surprise and then relief from Yume.

“Making food together and then eating it together...” Yume started saying as I began filling up my bowl with more food. And then, under her breath, she

continued, “I wonder if this is what it’s like to be married.”

I glanced at her. “It’s not too different from how we already are.”

“You think so?”

“We live in the same house and have the same last name.”

“That’s true... Huh?” Yume tilted her head in confusion. “Did you just...”

“What?”

“No, it’s just that, uh...” Yume’s cheeks flushed pink and she fixed her gaze on the table. “You’re just making it sound like we’re already married.”

“Hm? Oh...” I wasn’t thinking as clearly as usual, so it took a while for my brain to process what I’d said. “It just feels that way because we only talk like this when it’s just the two of us. If you’ve got a problem, why don’t you get a boyfr—”

“No.” She immediately refused.

I was so taken aback, I fell silent.

Yume stared at her now empty bowl. “I don’t want to.”

“You don’t want to...what?”

“What do you think?” she asked, looking up at me expectantly.

Suddenly, it was like something had gotten stuck in my throat. I couldn’t make so much as a sound.

Yume giggled. “Okay, I think I get it now.”

“Get what?”

“Nothing. I was just thinking about how I had a really great boyfriend in middle school that made all the other boys seem inferior in comparison.”

“Huh?”

“Just kidding.” She grinned at me like a child who’d gotten away with a prank.

Had this total klutz of an honor student just toyed with me?

“You should sleep some more after you’re done eating. You still can’t think

straight, right?”

“Yeah... I’ll do that.”

That had to have been it. I couldn’t think straight. Otherwise, there was no way I would’ve fallen for this girl’s idiotic prank. *Seriously, what’s your game here? You’re not being as pissy as usual, nor are you fawning over me like you used to. It’s like you’re a completely different person.*

Yume Irido

I exhaled deeply after I confirmed that Mizuto had gone back to his room. I sat down and leaned against my chair. This was my limit. I could only express my true feelings by obfuscating it in the guise of a joke. It *had* been kind of fun, though.

I found myself giggling. Thinking about how he was most likely still agonizing over the true meaning of my words had me grinning from ear to ear. This was how women—*adult* women—enjoyed themselves. I really *had* matured. There was no way that my middle school self would have been able to pull off a high-level ploy like this. Suddenly, my laughter grew out of control.

“Yume? What are you giggling about?”

“Huh?!” I jumped.

My mom had showed up out of nowhere. *When the heck did she get home?!*

Mizuto Irido

“I’ve heard catching someone else’s cold makes them better, but...is that true?” I heard Yume whisper.

I immediately knew I was dreaming. She was all bark and no bite—gung ho on the surface without the ability to follow through. Someone like that could never wear such an alluring, captivating smile. Was she trying to pull a fast one on me?

The closer she came to me, the more I started to awaken from this dream. But even as I started waking up, I could still vividly see her smile as if it’d been

burned into my eyelids. I was surprised by how simple of a guy I was if, after getting toyed with, I was having this kind of dream. I knew there was no way she was capable of being so bold and forward to make a move on me while I was asleep.

Even when we were dating, she rarely ever initiated kisses. I mentally scoffed and slowly opened my eyes. By now, it was probably already late at night, but I wasn't all that tired, most likely due to the fact that I'd already slept a good deal during the day. *Maybe I'll read a book to kill time.*

For a second, I thought I might've *still* been dreaming. When I fully opened my eyes, I was met with Yume's very real face. I softly gasped. I felt her warm breath gently against my lips. I saw her moving her hair behind her ear as she moved her face closer to mine. If I moved, she'd know I was awake. All I could do was watch as the scene unfolded in front of me.

The incident from the festival replayed in my head. It was one of the few times that she'd been the one to kiss me—no, wait. She'd "lost her balance." So what was this, then? Did she lose her balance again? Wow, what a coincidence — Of course it wasn't a coincidence! I needed to calm down and get my thoughts in order.

How many times is this going to happen? Please, no... Let's look at the facts. We live in the same house. There are a lot of opportunities for the two of us to be alone. Sure, that's okay for family members, but if our relationship changes, we—

"Just kidding..." Yume pulled her head back.

I felt relief course through my body. I closed my eyes, quickly pretending to be asleep as Yume began looking down on me.

"If colds were that easily healed, nobody would be scared of them," she muttered as if she was laughing at herself.

Then I heard her walk away. After I was absolutely sure that she'd left, I slowly sat up. The cooling patch that'd been on my head fell off and landed next to my bed. I silently stared at it.

What's your goddamn deal?! Had she been making a joke for some

nonexistent crowd when she'd said that she was kidding?! Even comedians don't make jokes when they don't have an audience!

I groaned. I could still feel a faint pain in my throat, but my body had mostly recovered. Even so, I had something new to be worried about. I felt dizzy. *Why? Seriously, what the hell? I have no clue what I'm supposed to do.*

"Oh, Mizuto-kun, you're up," Yuni-san said as she poked her head into my room. She walked in and sat in the chair that Yume had just been sitting in. "How are you feeling? Better?"

"Yeah... Pretty much."

"Ah, to be young. I wish I could've taken care of you like a mom would while you were sick, but I missed my chance," Yuni-san lightly giggled.

I checked the clock. It was almost midnight. By my calculations, I'd been asleep for three to four hours. If she hadn't had the chance to take care of me, did that mean she'd only just gotten back home?

"Truth be told... Oh, and if Yume asks, you didn't hear this from me," she said happily while holding her finger up to her mouth. "I asked Yume if she wanted me to take over for her, but she flat-out refused, saying that she wanted to take care of you by herself."

She wanted to take care of me by herself?

"She gets dead tired doing new things, but she insisted on this. I'm so glad to have raised such a responsible kid!" Yuni-san beamed proudly.

She wasn't trying to imply anything; she truly was proud of her child's growth. I wasn't, though. I knew Yume hadn't tended to me because she'd grown more responsible. No, there was something else behind it. *Do you like me? Or do you hate me?*

As siblings, the answer to that didn't matter whatsoever. After all, we'd be stepsiblings regardless of whether she hated me or not. *Are you trying to change our relationship? Are you trying to be more than what we are?* I couldn't calm myself down. These emotions were swelling inside me, and I had no way of quelling them. Despite that, there was one thing I was absolutely sure of.

“Can you thank her for me?” I asked.

“Huh? You should thank her yourself.”

“It’s...too embarrassing,” I muttered, looking away from her.

Yuni-san blinked before grinning. “Oh dear, you really do have a cute side, don’t you, Mizuto-kun!”

“Please don’t tease me.”

“All right, that settles it.”

“Huh?”

“I’m not going to thank her for you! If you’re really grateful, you should do it yourself—but it can wait until you’re ready. Make sure you do, though, okay?”

“Uh...”

Yuni-san giggled. “Did that sound mom-like?” she asked with a soft smile. “That is the secret to successful cohabitation. Take it from me—a person who’s already failed at it once.”

She made it really hard to argue. “Okay.” As her stepson, I had no choice but to agree.

Yume Irido

I woke up a lot later than usual. I’d stayed up so late the night before waiting by Mizuto’s side until I knew he was in good enough shape that I could leave and not worry. Sure, he might’ve looked really adorable while he slept, but I also wanted to return the favor from when he took care of me while I was sick back in April. Eventually, mom told me that he was feeling better.

Now, I was in the living room, considering what to do for lunch, when I heard someone coming down the stairs. In the next moment, the door opened and in came Mizuto in his pajamas. He had a serious case of bedhead.

“Oh, morning,” I said.

Mizuto glanced at me and silently walked to the kitchen, poured himself a cup of water, and gulped it down. He looked perfectly normal.

“Is your fever gone?” I asked, walking towards him.

He didn’t say a word.

“Are you hungry? I was thinking about making some lunch.”

Mizuto kept quiet as he moved to the fridge, pulling out some fried rice and placing it in the microwave. *H-Huh? Why is he ignoring me? He can’t be worried about getting me sick too, right? He’s not contagious anymore.*

“Hey, why are you—” I reached out to grab his shoulder, but he dodged and stepped away.

“Huh?”

Mizuto glanced at me as I grabbed the air where he’d just been standing.

“Don’t come too close to me,” he said in a soft voice before shutting the microwave door.

He kept his eyes firmly on the microwave as it heated his food up, not saying anything else, leaving me completely confused.

“Wh-What’s your problem?!” *After all I did for you yesterday, you could at least be a little more grateful! How about a “thank you”?!*

Suddenly, I heard a short giggle from the dining table. I looked back and saw mom looking at us, smiling.

“Do you know what’s going on?” I asked.

“I’m sure you’ll find out sooner or later.”

Uh, can you just tell me now? Neither Mizuto nor mom seemed to have any intention of filling me in.

Isana Higashira Will Not Be Led Astray

“Um... Would you like to adjourn to my room?”

Mizuto Irido

Not to brag, but I’ve been in a girl’s room before. And again, not to brag, but that girl also happened to be my girlfriend. You might not believe me, but I really wasn’t bragging, because I’m not proud of it. Sure, I’d been over to my girlfriend’s house, but I’d never been over to the house of a girl who was also my friend.

“Mizuto-kun, would you like to visit my home tomorrow?” Isana Higashira had asked when we spoke over the phone last night.

“Why? I don’t have anything I wanna do at your house.”

“Are you positive about that? Don’t you want to witness me in the flesh?”

“I don’t need to go to your house to do that. You pop up at my house even when I don’t ask you to come over.”

“Precisely what I mean!”

“Explain.”

“I visit your house almost daily, which has prompted my mother to...”

“Get pissed at you?”

“Not at all. She simply wishes to greet your family.”

“Oh...” *That makes sense. Most parents would want to meet their kid’s friend’s family. It’s completely normal...I think.* From the little information I had about her mom, I knew that she was pretty intense but was very knowledgeable about societal expectations and common sense.

“However, don’t you find it a little uncomfortable for a friend to bring their parent all the way to your house for the sole purpose of meeting your family?”

“Yeah, true.”

“So to avoid that, I suggested that she meet you and you alone first.”

“That’s still pretty annoying. Why do I need to meet your mom at all?”

“I know—it’s almost as if we’re tying the knot,” she giggled.

“Any intention I had of coming just disappeared.”

“Please reconsider! Do you wish for me to be slain by my mother’s hand?!”

“Y’know, I’ve been wondering, did your mom used to be in a gang or something?”

“Oh no, I seem to have misrepresented my mother. She has never been part of a gang. She doesn’t require that pretense to be violent.”

“Now I *really* don’t want to go.”

“There’s no need to worry! She truly only wishes to thank you and apologize.”

“Thank me *and* apologize? I don’t even know where to start.” I let out a sigh.

It wouldn’t hurt to accept Higashira’s invitation. After all, it wasn’t like there’d be any real problems. Also, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t even a little curious about her home. She’d spent so much time going through my bookcase; it was about time to do the same to hers. It wouldn’t be fair otherwise.

But also, there was something else weighing on me. I glanced at the wall as if to look into the other side where *she* was. How would she react if I told her I was going to Higashira’s house?

“Are you rejecting my offer?” Higashira asked, worried. “If you wouldn’t enjoy visiting my home, that’s all right...”

“No, it’s okay. I’ll be there,” I immediately answered. It was so quick, it made me doubt that I’d even been taking time to debate going.

Higashira perked up. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. It’s about time you had your privacy violated too.”

“*Just* my privacy?”

“I’m gonna make you lay everything bare.”

“Huh? O-Oh, if that’s the case, wouldn’t it normally be the gentleman’s responsibility to prepare the necessary items?”

“I’m talking about your bookcase, by the way. Oops. Shoulda mentioned that.”

“I-I can’t believe you were toying with my emotions. My purity! Mother!”

“Stop! It’s not my fault you have a dirty mind!” I absolutely did not want her mom to confront me about “dirty talking” to her child on the phone.

“Hmph. Please be careful, Mizuto-kun. Just so you are aware, my house is bereft of any of the proper preventative items we may require.”

“My house doesn’t have any either, meaning that it’ll be business as usual.”

“True enough. I’ll be sure to tidy up my room!” she promised before hanging up the phone.

I once again found myself looking at the wall separating our rooms. *You have no right to complain. I don’t have any obligation to protect your feelings to the point that I’d make Higashira feel lonely. Not anymore.*

The Higashira residence was in an apartment building a little off the main road. I’d walked her to the front door before, but I’d never actually gone inside.

Unlike Minami-san and Kawanami’s place, Higashira’s building didn’t have auto-locking doors. This made it really easy for me to waltz in and take the elevator to her floor. She’d told me that she lived in a corner apartment at the end of the hall, which I confirmed by looking at the nameplate by the door. As I stood outside, I considered ringing the doorbell but instead pulled out my phone and called her.

“Higashira?”

“Mnh... Hello...?” she said, clearly half-asleep.

“I can’t believe it. Are you *just* waking up?”

“No... I will be right there.” And with that, she hung up.

It was currently one in the afternoon, a time when most normal people would

be up. To be fair, it *was* summer vacation. Of course she was gonna take it easy and sleep in.

I decided to patiently wait while she made herself presentable. In the meantime, I considered reading the book I'd brought, but just as I reached into my bag, the door opened.

"Please come in..." Higashira said, poking her head out from behind the door.

I found myself frowning at her appearance. "Is this how you greet your guests?"

She had obvious bedhead and was wearing a baggy T-shirt and loose fit shorts. I didn't have to be a detective to know she'd just rolled out of bed. She wasn't wearing a belt or anything, which meant that the puffed-out hem of her shirt swayed like a curtain above the stomach it was supposed to cover. The shirt was also showing its age; the elastic band in the collar was obviously broken and did little to nothing to hide the cleavage it was supposed to. Meanwhile, her shorts did little to nothing to cover her thighs. This was *not* the kind of outfit you'd wear to greet a guest, least of all a guy.

I'd always known that Higashira wasn't very careful about her appearance or aware of her surroundings, but at the very least she wore appropriate clothing whenever I saw her. *Does she really dress like this at home?*

"Oh, of course... I'm still in my pajamas, aren't I...?" Higashira lightly tugged on her collar and looked at her attire.

I quickly looked away, otherwise I would've probably seen everything that the T-shirt was supposed to be covering. *Hm? Wait, is she wearing a...?*

"My apologies... I just woke up..." Higashira said with a yawn.



“Go change. I’ll wait.”

“Oh, no worries. I’ll be sure to change later. Please, come in...” Higashira rubbed her eyes and turned around to walk farther into her apartment.

Uh, you sure? I tilted my head as I walked inside.

Higashira yawned once more as she took off her slippers and stepped up onto the wooden floor, nearly losing her balance but barely managing to catch herself. But in the midst of that, I noticed a jiggle. *Hm? Did her boobs just...jiggle?*

“Phew, that was a close call. Oh, right. Would you like slippers?” Higashira asked, sheepishly laughing.

“No, I’m okay.”

“Okay then. Onwards,” she said, gesturing for me to follow her.

Had I just imagined it? It’s not as if I’d been observing her breasts enough to notice the subtle differences in how they moved. Either way, Higashira tottered down the hallway for a little before stopping.

“This is my room,” she said, opening the door.

“It’s surprisingly close to the entrance.”

“It certainly is! It’s very convenient whenever I decide to leave the house.”

“As someone whose room is on the second floor, I really envy you.”

“The grass is always greener, as they say. I’ve always yearned to reside in a two-story home.”

“What’s over there?” I asked, gesturing to the door at the end of the hall.

“Oh, that’s my parents’ room. And then down that hallway to the left is the living room.”

“Should I say hi to them first?”

“My father won’t be home today. However, my mother will return later, so you can greet her then.”

Her family was different from Kawanami’s and Minami’s. The way she’d

phrased that implied that it wasn't normal for her dad to be out of the house, whereas with those two, it was an everyday thing.

"You needn't be shy," she added, gesturing for me to enter her room.

Exactly as I'd imagined, her bookcase was crammed with light novels, and whatever didn't fit there was messily strewn about her bed and desk. There was even a pile of books on her floor. Unsurprisingly, there were also school papers and socks all over the place. *Yep, this sure is Higashira's room.* I saw a clean enough spot on the floor, so I sat down.

Higashira yawned. "You could sit on the bed as well, if you'd like."

"I'm not nearly as bold as you."

"Bold? I don't believe sitting on the bed is necessarily bold..." she said, tilting her head before sitting on her knees.

I could've sworn she told me she'd "tidy up," but there was no sign of that being the case, what with all these papers strewn about the place. *I hope none of them are her summer homework...huh?* As I went to pick one up, my hand met the sensation of cloth. *What is this? It's rose-red and has two cups...* I froze as it dawned on me what it was. *Is this a...bra?*

It was unmistakably a bra, but something about it was different from Yume's. What, you might be wondering? The size. By her own admission, Higashira was a G-cup. *Argh! You really shouldn't leave things like this when you have guests over!* I quickly turned away from the bra and as soon as I did, something else happened.

There she was, sitting on her messy bed, when she let out a groan—the same kind one makes when they're taking their first stretch of the day after waking up. Then, she gripped the hem of her T-shirt with both hands and pulled it up. First, I saw her bellybutton, then her ribs. If she kept going, there were two specific parts of her, barely protected by her T-shirt, that would fall out. After all, what goes up must come down. They were no match for gravity.

Suddenly, it hit me. If her bra was on the ground, that meant she wasn't wearing anything under her shirt. There wasn't anything to protect her from my unintentional gaze besides the thin cloth of her T-shirt. My brain froze. First of

all, I'd never seen underboobs before, but I also couldn't believe Higashira wasn't wearing a bra.

"Ngh!" Higashira groaned as she struggled with her T-shirt getting stuck on her chest.

Time began moving again for me. This was my chance.

"Stop!" I cried, giving her the chance to avoid doing something she'd never be able to take back.

Higashira paused and looked at me, but it seemed that she still hadn't realized what she was doing, judging by the confused look she was shooting me. It took her a few seconds of staring at me with her underboobs exposed before she finally yanked her shirt back down and froze. Silence temporarily filled the room before she broke it.

"Phew, that startled me."

"Yeah, I *know*!"

"Ehe heh heh. I completely spaced out. I was not in a state of mind to recognize there was a male in my room."

"You nearly gave me a heart attack."

"I'm terribly sorry," she said, bowing her head.

As she did, her loose collar once again revealed the two lumps hidden by her shirt, confirming my suspicions that she wasn't wearing a bra. I immediately looked away. *Her skin's so pale. Just pale, right? I didn't see any pink, did I?*

Higashira could already be described as extremely careless and defenseless, but being in the comfort of her own room amped it up several notches. Maybe she was comfortable around me due to our close, trusting relationship, but the level of comfort was a little *too* high. She had absolutely no clue how to properly act when other people were in her room.

"Look, I know this is your room, but there's a limit to how slovenly you can dress. Your room's a mess too."

"Funny story... I was planning to tidy up before I slept... Oh no, I didn't put away the one I was wearing yesterday."

“By that, I’m assuming you’re referring to *that thing* on the floor?” I asked, referencing the bra I’d noticed earlier.

“Ehe heh heh... I’m so embarrassed.”

“You should be!”

I pinched the edge of the bra, trying to make as little contact with it as possible before throwing it and hitting her in the face. Completely unfazed, she grabbed it by both straps and held it in front of her chest.

“What do you think? I believe it’s quite the sexy piece of underwear.”

“Do you listen to anything I say? Or is it just in one ear and out the other with you?!”

“Do not let my words deceive you; I’m plenty embarrassed. I am simply trying to play it off with my behavior. I wish you would have picked up on that.”

How am I supposed to pick up on that?! I could use a cue or two. Blush a little, at least!

Higashira proceeded to stuff her bra under the sheets.

“Anyway, why aren’t you wearing a bra?”

“Isn’t that obvious? I was asleep until you arrived.”

“You take it off when you sleep?”

“Yes, I wear a sports bra at night. See? This one,” she said, pulling out a piece of black cloth and showing it to me.

It looked like a short, plain camisole.

“Apparently, I must wear this in order to continue the battle against gravity.”

“You care about your looks?”

“No, not me. My mother. She’s made it clear she’ll kill me if I don’t take good care of my breasts. She said, ‘I’ll be pissed if the beautiful rack I gave birth to goes to shit.’ Her words, not mine.”

Wouldn’t killing her get rid of said kid with said beautiful rack, though? “So then why aren’t you wearing it?”

“I remove it while I’m unconscious.”

“Uh-huh...” I decided to accept her explanation. As a guy, I had no clue what so-called boob jail felt like. I didn’t have the knowledge or experience to comment further.

Higashira tossed the bra aside and looked down at her boobs. “Hm...” She groaned, tilting her head. “Must I truly wear a bra?”

“Yes.”

“But perhaps you’d be happier if I didn’t?”

“No.”

“Are you certain?” she asked, pulling her shirt tightly against her chest, highlighting what was underneath. Then she began moving up and down. “Look how bouncy they are!”

“Knock it off!”

The springs in her bed creaked with every move she made. Without the support of a bra, her boobs freely swayed in accordance with her movements, allowing me to sense their weight. I turned to look away, but that seemingly only flipped a switch for Higashira. A devilish smile crept across her face.

“Whatever could be the matter? Are you perhaps becoming aroused by the breasts of the very girl you rejected, Mizuto-kun?”

“You are so lucky that I’m chill. Seriously, you should thank me for being such a gentleman!”

“Ehe heh heh, you’re very cute when you’re embarrassed. Perhaps I should close the distance between us?”

“How about no?” I moved back as Higashira got off her bed, but this only encouraged Higashira to lean even more into the joke, because this time, she grabbed both of her boobs with her hands and held them up. Their weight was even more apparent now, seeing how her fingers disappeared into her shirt.

“They’re very soft! I wouldn’t mind if you touched them.”

She’s getting way too full of herself! I wasn’t about to let her walk all over me.

“Really?” I asked in a serious voice.

“Huh?”

“You really wouldn’t mind if I touched them?”

“Huh?”

I looked right into her eyes. Suddenly, she began blinking unusually quickly.

“U-Uh, w-well...”

“You really won’t mind?” I got up and moved towards her.

“W-Well,” she began as she backed up. The predator had become the prey. “I certainly wouldn’t be against it... But also, I’d like time to mentally prepare myself... I-I don’t think I’m quite in the correct emotional state at the minute... I-I might’ve gotten a little too full of myself— Ah!” She was throwing out excuse after excuse, when suddenly, she yelped and crouched as if to hide her body.

“You okay?”

“U-Uh, um... Well, if you didn’t notice then that’s good...” she mumbled. She raised her head. Her cheeks had turned bright red. “My nipples...got hard.” She softly chuckled.

I froze. “Uh...what?”

“Ehe...heh heh... I may have gotten a little too excited. Ow!”

She winced in pain as I smacked her over the head. Let this be a lesson that there are certain lines friends shouldn’t cross.

After that, I left the room to give Higashira time to change. *Does she not know boundaries exist no matter how close of a friend you are?* It should be common knowledge that you don’t act completely unhinged even with the closest of friends. You have to show *some* restraint.

Sure, I may have been a little too unhinged myself. I’d been putting on an act and pretending like I was going to touch her boobs just to get back at her, but still, it wasn’t exactly the best look for me...even if I wasn’t serious about touching them. *I swear.*

I leaned against the wall and stared at the ceiling. It felt really uncomfortable just standing in someone else's house. What if her mom came home right now? What if her mom *didn't* come home? Luckily, I didn't have the opportunity to worry about that because in the next moment, the door opened.

"I'm hooome!" someone shouted from the entrance, making me jump a little. I didn't even need to go check to know who it was; I could tell from the voice. "Isana, you awake? Oh?" The woman stopped when she saw me aimlessly standing in the hallway.

She was tall and slender. She didn't look as aggressive as Higashira had described her as being, but her pants and short hair gave off a boyish vibe.

Yuni-san already looked young for her age, but Higashira's mom was in a league of her own. She could've told me she was Higashira's sister and I would've believed her. The only way I'd know that wasn't true was because Higashira had never mentioned any siblings.

"Thanks for having me..." I wasn't sure what to do, so for the time being, I decided to politely greet her.

"Hm?" Higashira's mom approached me, squinted, and moved her face close to mine as if she was examining it. I tried moving back more. "You... Are you *the* Mizuto-kun?"

"Y-Yes. I'm Mizuto Irido." *Is this how she addresses people she's just met?*

I felt intimidation radiating off of her, and the fact that she was almost as tall as I was didn't help. All I could do was return her gaze with a dubious one of my own.

"Hm?" Higashira's mom tilted her head. "Weird... You're Isana's pal, right? How's it that you know proper manners?" *I don't even know how to respond.* "From what Isana's told me, the 'Mizuto-kun' she hangs out with is an unsociable loner and a bully... But look at you! You're a total stand-up guy. And hot, to boot!"

"Higashira! What the hell have you been saying about me?!"

Then I heard a weird, frantic yelp from the other side of the door. After a few seconds, Higashira's head popped out from behind it. She was still wearing the

same T-shirt as before, but now her bra straps were showing through the loose collar. *Thank god she's wearing a bra now. Wait, this isn't good. I can still see her chest.*

"Why are you shout— Oh, hello, mother."

"Isana." Higashira's mom glared at her. "Is that how you greet someone who's come home?"

"Welcome home, mother!" Higashira quickly saluted her mom.

"Good." Her mom nodded. *What is this, the military?* Suddenly, she was pointing her thumb towards me. "Isana, who's this guy?"

"Huh? That's Mizuto-kun."

"*Him?* Really?"

"Yes, I'm not lying. I told you he's quite adorable in the face area, didn't I?"

I knew Higashira spoke to most people in her usual formal speech, but I had no idea this extended to her mother as well.

"Hm..." Higashira's mom began sizing me up. This was starting to get annoying.

"Sorry, can I ask you something?" I asked.

"What?"

"Could I ask for your name?"

"Mine?" Higashira's mom asked.

"Yes, I'd prefer to call you by your name instead of 'Higashira's mom.'"

She began cheerfully laughing. "You're an interestin' guy. My name's written with the characters for 'lull' and 'tiger.' Can ya guess?"

"By lull, I'm assuming that's as in 'lull of the sea,' right?"

"Yep. So what's my name?"

Logically, combining the two would get you Nagitora, but that wasn't very feminine. "Is it...Natora?"

"Correct."

A smile spread across Higashira's mom's—I mean, Natora-san's face, and she patted me on the shoulders. "Aw, man. Ha ha ha, I'm sorry I doubted who you were, Mizuto-kun! You're just completely different from what I imagined."

"It's okay. Doesn't bother me."

"You're a smart guy, ya know that? You're probably the fifth person in my life to guess my name on their first try!"

Sure, it was a bit of an unusual name, but I had a good guess that it was one of those flashy names that parents would sometimes give their kids. Also, I figured that the first character in her name had to do with the ocean because her daughter's name, Isana, had to do with the sea. In olden times, when it was written with a proper character, it meant "whale."

"You know your manners, despite bein' a kid. I like you, Mizuto-kun. Guy like you's totally wasted on Isana!"

"Thanks." *Can you stop hitting my shoulders now?*

"Aren't you glad she doesn't despise you, Mizuto-kun?" Isana asked. "Otherwise you may have been beaten to a pulp."

"Huh?"

"Isana, don't be running your mouth off to a guest! All I'd do is kick his ass a little." *And how exactly is that different from beating me to a pulp?!* "Isana, is this how you dress when you have a guest over? What's the matter with ya?"

"Huh? I don't see the problem. I'm wearing my indoor clothes, and I don't plan on going out." Higashira frowned.

Finally, someone with common sense had arrived. Surely, Natora-san would show her the error of her loose T-shirt, baggy short-wearing ways.

"Hm..." Natora-san folded her arms and began taking a closer look at her daughter's attire. "Actually, you know what? This works. Stay like that."

"Yay!"

Stay like that?! Excuse me?! Are you okay with your daughter's boobs practically spilling out of her shirt?

Natora-san began walking down the hallway and called out to Higashira. “Isana, you haven’t eaten yet, have ya? It’s a little late, but let’s have lunch. Mizuto-kun, you probably already ate before you came, so I’ll whip somethin’ up for you to snack on.”

“Oh, it’s okay. You don’t have to. Just ignore me.”

“Huh?! Not happening! Like hell am I gonna ignore the first friend my daughter’s invited over,” she said with a fierce smile.

If I were a girl, I bet I would’ve fallen for her right then and there, what with how cool and handsome she was. No matter what she said, it sounded like a command.

Higashira followed her mom to a door down the hall that opened to their living room and dining room. At the end of it was a balcony, where their laundry was hung out to dry. *Does carelessness run in the family or something?!*

“Isana, you’re having oyakodon. Sit your butt down and wait.”

“Understood.”

Natora-san headed into the kitchen while Higashira walked over and plopped herself down on the couch. She turned her head to me and patted the cushion next to her, motioning for me to sit, so I did.

“Your introduction was a great success,” Higashira said, looking at me.

“Yeah, looks like it. I’m glad we got off on the right foot.”

“Now you can visit whenever you’d like!”

“If you can actually get dressed next time, I’ll think about it,” I said, not turning to look at her.

If I looked her way, I was sure to catch a glimpse of her chest.

“I implore you to reconsider. Changing clothes is very cumbersome...” Higashira said, sulking.

I really wished that she would have some kind of decency—even the smallest amount of it—as a fellow human being. Then again, she *had* grown up with a mom who gave her approval for this kind of attire. If her only knowledge of the

world was from her home environment, then it wasn't surprising that she'd turned out like this.

Higashira and I chatted for a while about upcoming book releases before Natora-san returned from the kitchen.

"Here. Eat up," she said, placing a bowl of oyakodon in front of Higashira.

Looks were deceiving. I hadn't expected her mom to be *this* amazing of a cook. This was the kind of quality you'd expect from restaurants. Higashira didn't take the time to appreciate it or thank her mom, though—she immediately dug in. I couldn't shake the image of a dog eating its food from my mind as I watched her.

"Here. This is for you. Take what you want." Natora-san placed a tray of cookies in front of me.

"O-Oh," Higashira said, her mouth still filled with rice. "You made those yesterday, didn't you?"

"Sorry they're not fresh, but I promise they taste good...probably," Natora-san said.

"You made them yourself?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's my hobby. No point in livin' if you're not enjoyin' yourself."

It was certainly surprising that a woman like *that* liked to bake. Honestly, I was kind of impressed by how effortlessly she admitted to it. Maybe some of this forwardness had rubbed off on Higashira.

I began eating the cookies—delicious, by the way—while Natora-san sat across from me.

"So hey, Mizuto-kun, thanks again for takin' care of my daughter."

"Yep."

"Hm? Ain't this the part where you say that she's the one takin' care of you?"

"Your daughter is being taken care of by me," I reiterated.

"Um, pardon?!" Higashira chimed in. "That's incorrect! Our relationship is

much more mutual, is it not?!”

Natora-san heartily laughed. “He’s a real smart-ass, huh? Perfect.” Natora-san crossed her legs and violently chomped on a cookie. *Uh, I don’t think you’re supposed to eat cookies the way you eat rice crackers.* “Isana’s always moved to the beat of her own drum. Makes it hard to work with others, but I think it’s a hell of a lot better than her being some forgettable background character. Only problem is she could never make any friends. Can’t tell you how happy it made me to see her comin’ home, smile plastered on her face as she talked my ear off about you.”

“I-I wasn’t smiling *that* much.”

“You were. Oh wait, you know what? You were *grinnin’*! God, that creeped me the hell out.”

“You’re horrible! This is abuse!” Higashira protested.

Natora-san let out a hearty laugh. They seemed really close. “You’re the only person I’ve met that’s actually able to hang with someone this socially dense. It’s like you two’re on the same wavelength. Am I right, or...?”

“Yeah... Higashira’s the first person in my life who I feel like I have a genuine rapport with. I don’t make friends just for the hell of it.”

“Oh?”

“M-Mizuto-kun, please. You’re humiliating me...” Higashira groaned.

What’s the big deal? I’m just being honest. There’s nothing to be embarrassed about.

Natora-san laughed and slapped her knees. “Okay, you two are gettin’ married.”

It took a second for my mind to process what she’d said. “Huh?”

“Wh-What?” It seemed as if Higashira was just as confused as I.

“I hear you’re top of your class—a real honor student. Impressive, considering the kinda school ya got into. Isana’ll never find someone as good as you who she jives with as much. That being said, take my daughter’s hand.”

“Uh...”

“What’re you hesitatin’ for? You’re gonna ignore a sincere request from her loving mom? I pride myself on having a good eye for others. I know you’re gonna make my daughter happy. I’m sure of it. Marry Isana. Now. And by now, I mean when you two turn eighteen.”

She was so adamant and hyped up about it that it made me wonder if Higashira had talked to her mom about *that*.

“Higashira,” I whispered. “Did you not tell her?” *She wouldn’t be saying this if she knew that I rejected her daughter, right?*

“O-Of course not!”

“Why not?”

“After some consideration, I arrived at the conclusion that she’d beat you to a pulp.”

I froze and slowly turned back to Natora-san, who was shooting a piercing glare at me. I could feel myself starting to sweat. Higashira might’ve been right. I hadn’t seen firsthand just how violent Natora-san could get, but I kinda got a good read from the pressure she was exerting. She was definitely the type to kill anyone who hurt her daughter. She was a certified overbearing parent, but in a much more violent way.

Yeah, I need to keep my mouth shut if I want to live. She absolutely can’t find out that I already rejected her daughter.

“Hm? What’s the matter? I’m offerin’ a pretty good deal here, especially if you’ve got a thing for Isana.”

“Y-Yes, I *do* like her, but only as a friend.”

“Good enough for me. Nothin’ wrong with friends getting married. She might be a handful, but I guarantee that her body leaves nothin’ to be desired.” She gave me a thumbs-up of approval.

“Ehe heh heh,” Higashira sheepishly laughed.

Stop that! Your mom just said some horrible things! Plus, what did she mean by “there’s nothing wrong with friends getting married”? I mean, sure, I guess I

wouldn't mind being roommates, but still...

"Hmph," Natora-san snorted before taking another chomp out of a cookie. "You're *that* kinda guy, huh? The kind that acts like romance is a pain in the ass."

"If I'm being honest, yeah."

Natora-san deeply exhaled at my response. She may have been disappointed, but I wasn't going to lie to her. It'd be worse if she—of all people—caught me in a lie.

"Ya really are just a kid who doesn't understand anythin'. Friends are the exact kinds of people who should get married."

"Huh?"

"Listen up. Married people are just what you call people who've washed their hands of the annoying world of romance." Her words were so unexpected, I felt myself gasp slightly. "Just by putting a stupid ring on your left ring finger, you get a shit ton of people off your back. Your parents stop buggin' ya about whether you've got a special someone and when you're gettin' married. Your life becomes so much easier when you're married. Everyone in the world's obsessed with love and can't get the thought of it out of their heads, but by getting married, you can finally shake 'em off."

Natora-san heartily laughed. "I'm not tryin' to throw shade at people who marry for love—they're completely valid," she continued. "I think they're takin' a gamble, though. There's no guarantee that you and the person you love will fit each other perfectly when living together. Look around you. Middle school couples break up when they get to high school, and high school couples break up when they go to college. No way in hell little shits like them will ever find someone they can spend their entire lives with. If you're gonna get married, you should do it with someone ya get along with—just my two cents."

"That makes sense. You and dad get along very well," Higashira said.

"Yeah. We still play *Monster Hunter* together."

"I feel as if I've seen you abuse him more often than not."

“It’s his fault for always forgetting to bring the Large Barrel Bombs!” Natora-san let out a booming laugh like a pirate’s.

Her words about middle school couples breaking up when they got to high school made me think about my situation. She certainly had a point. Romantic feelings were more often than not fleeting, and shouldn’t be used as criteria for choosing a life partner. Marriage also helped eliminate any feelings of doubt in your relationship. Her logic was sound.

I couldn’t deny the possibility that even if Higashira and I didn’t work out as a couple, we could still perfectly function as a *married* couple. It’d probably be effortless for the two of us to get along.

“I get that I kinda sprung this idea on you, so you know what? Take your time and think about it. You’re still at an age that most of your brains aren’t in the right ‘head.’” *Does she think that high school students are some kind of underdeveloped animals?* “Isana.”

“Yes?” Higashira’s bowl was empty, and she was licking off the grains of rice around her mouth.

“Seduce this guy,” Natora-san commanded, pointing at me.

“I would certainly have done so if it was possible.”

“Say what? What the hell do you think those huge tits of yours are for?! Use ‘em!”

“You make it sound so simple, but you are unaware of how difficult it is to pierce through Mizuto-kun’s defenses.”

“You dumbass, he’s obviously just holdin’ himself back. Look, there’s usually a person or two around at his place, right? Here’s the deal. I’m gonna head out for a bit. If I come back and you’ve pussied out, consider yourself dead meat.”

Higashira let out an annoyed groan. *Uh... What’s going on?* I was having trouble keeping up. *Why are these people having this kind of private conversation in front of the person they’re talking about?* I almost felt as if I’d been reincarnated in a world with different common sense.

Natora-san stood up. “So yeah, take it easy, Mizuto-kun. We got thick walls,

so bein' a little loud's no problem."

"Just ignore me..."

"How many times do I gotta say this? Like hell am I gonna ignore you," she said, grinning, and then she left.

I cannot believe she actually left. After that, we spent some time in silence munching on the cookies. Higashira seemed to be more reserved than usual. Usually, she'd be asking to use my lap as a pillow or something.

"Uh...Mizuto-kun?" Higashira said slowly as if she was searching for the right words. "You don't have to take what my mother said too seriously."

"I know."

"She's always very quick to jump to conclusions and give commands based on them."

"I see."

"Um...would you like to adjourn to my room?"

I turned my head and saw Higashira looking up at me. At this angle, I could once again see the pale skin that her collar failed to cover on her chest. Maybe it was just my imagination, but I felt like I could see a light blue cloth peeking out too.

"Yeah..."

Natora-san's words suddenly rang in my head. *He's obviously just holdin' himself back.* Well, of course I was. Higashira's looks were not even remotely a factor influencing my rejection.

Maybe it'd be best if I revisited the order of events from back when I had rejected Higashira. I'd told her that I couldn't take her as my girlfriend, then she fell silent and stood there, and all I could do was watch. That was the only thing I *could* do.

Deep down, I'd always known that Higashira and I might not be able to remain friends forever because, like what had happened with Yume Ayai and me, our relationship might've tried to evolve into something more than friendship. In that case, I was sure I would want Higashira to hate me.

Of course, I'd been over the moon when I found out that Higashira liked me, but...someone else was still occupying the space in my heart. The thing was, though, I *chose* to keep *her* there. I didn't want her to cry. In exchange, I was willing to make Higashira cry instead. I knew it might result in me hating myself, but that was the only choice I could make in order to forgive myself.

But Higashira hadn't cried. She'd spaced out for a bit and hung her head, but when she looked up at me again, she was smiling. A weak laugh had escaped her lips. "Thank you for listening to me. Let's go home, Mizuto-kun," she'd said as if nothing had happened.

That had caught me off guard. "Are...you okay?" I'd asked.

Higashira had simply smiled in response as if she were trying to avoid answering my ridiculous question. "I'm not *okay*...but it's precisely because I'm not that I'm terrified of being left alone," she'd said, clutching her elbow.

This was the first time I'd ever seen Isana Higashira hurt. If it hadn't been me... If it'd been anyone else who'd hurt her, I would've made it my mission in life to destroy them by any means possible. There was no way I'd let them off scot-free. I'd make them rue the day that they hurt her.

In this case, though, *I* was the one who'd hurt her. I needed to punish myself. I needed to take responsibility as the one who rejected her. No matter how strange it was for her to request that I walk her home, I felt obligated to accept.

The very day that I'd rejected Higashira had ended the same way our days together always did. We had left school together, stopped by our usual bookstore, and talked about new releases and other interesting series. Same as always.

When we were about to go our separate ways for the day, Higashira had stopped me. "Truthfully...I appreciate your efforts today."

That was the first time I'd ever heard her voice tremble. It was very slight, but I noticed. It was more than enough to show me how desperately she'd been trying to calm her heart and preserve our friendship.

Maybe that was just how she was. Maybe she wasn't great at expressing herself because she didn't have experience being around others. No matter the

reason, she hadn't let her pain show. *She's so strong.*

The two of us were totally different. I'd sulk over the smallest thing. I would never put in the work to make things go back to normal with the person I liked, even if I wanted to reconcile. No matter how defeated she'd looked, I saw her as strong. Like someone I needed to protect at all costs.

That's why before she could turn and walk away, I'd grabbed her arm.

"Huh?" Surprise had filled Higashira's face, her eyes glistening from tears she'd been holding back.

"What's wrong with being friends?" I'd asked in an attempt to stop those tears from ever coming out. "Couples eventually break up. They go to college and fall out of contact. Isn't being friends so much better than that?!" I might've been talking out of my ass, doing everything I could to shit on romance and talk up friendship by going to extremes. But that hadn't mattered—I'd wanted to pull out all the stops to prevent her from shedding a single tear.

"I might not be able to kiss you, but I can at least hug you. I'll never treat you any differently whether you put on cute clothes or wear makeup—or don't do any of that. I don't want you to feel like you need to do anything different to be my friend. So..." After all that, I couldn't finish what I'd wanted to say. Not because I was incapable of it, but because Higashira had suddenly gripped my shirt.

"Please...stop... If you keep speaking...I will only fall more deeply in love with you!"

I'd stayed still, unsure how to react. The only one who could forgive me was Higashira. Even so, I'd wanted to promise her something.

"I won't change who I am. I'll always be the same Mizuto Irido that you've come to know."

I wasn't about to change just because she confessed to me or because I'd rejected her. That had been the only way to honor her strength. After a few seconds, I'd heard Higashira sucking snot back into her nose. She'd looked up at me with a bright smile on her face.

"Okay, then. I look forward to continuing our relationship!"

I'd been a little taken aback by how quickly she could change emotional states. I'd had a nagging feeling that she was pushing herself to act like nothing had happened, but as she waved her hand and began walking off, I'd understood. Isana Higashira was just this kind of person.

I'd squinted as I'd watched her leave, as though she were too bright for me to look at. But I hadn't fooled myself. My feelings weren't some kind of temporary lapse of judgment—they weren't love, they were faith. *I trust Isana Higashira.*

When the two of us returned to her room, she ended up sitting on her bed, and I stood by her desk. Her bed creaked as she put her full weight onto it. She was toying with her bangs as her eyes nervously darted around. She'd been the one who told me not to take what her mom said so seriously, but she was the one freaking out the most.

"Higashira?"

"Eek!" She jumped and began frantically waving her hands around.

Her reaction was so amusing, I couldn't help but tease her some more. "Not gonna do anything?"

"Huh? U-Uh, sh-should I perhaps disrobe?!"

"Is showing off your boobs the only trick you have up your sleeve?" *If you're trying to seduce someone, getting naked should be your trump card.*

Higashira fell on her side and moaned. "This is impossible for me. If I was capable of such feats, I wouldn't have been rejected."

"Don't let it get to you. You've already gotten further than most people would."

"True. I've already accomplished the impossible by bringing you to my room."

Seriously. It's hard to even bring your S.O. into your room when you're sick. Either way, I could tell that she'd calmed down. My eyes fell to her desk. It probably wasn't very polite to look around somebody else's room without their permission, but Higashira did it to me all the time, so I felt justified.

She had a tablet on her desk, several light novels, and a headset that didn't

seem to have been used too much, judging by the dust. I could deduce though that not much schoolwork was done here. *Is she even doing her summer homework?*

“Hm?” I noticed a single sheet of paper stuck in between everything. It looked like it had come from a notebook, but it didn’t seem like anything was written on it. I was curious, so I moved the light novel on top, eliciting a frantic yell from Higashira.

“W-Wait, Mizuto-kun. That’s—”

Unfortunately for her, she was too slow. By the time she said that, I’d already seen what she’d drawn. It was an illustration of the heroine of the light novel that’d been on top of it.

“Hm... I see.”

“Augh! No! Do not perceive it!”

“Stop freaking out. I already kinda suspected you either drew or wrote, if not both.”

“How? D-Did you look on my tablet, perchance?”

“Oh, so your novel’s on your tablet?”

“Ah! Notlikethis!” Higashira shoved her head under her pillow and writhed in agony.

I took the opportunity to get a full look at the drawing.

“Hm, you didn’t trace it. You even thought of an original pose. This is actually pretty good.”

“Not at all! No matter how many times I redraw it, I’m unable to get the arms, the legs, or the face right.”

“Uh-huh. Well, for someone like me who knows nothing about art, it looks good.” At the very least, it looked like something that’d catch some attention in art class.

“You are mistaken! I’m incapable of producing art of the same quality as that of the social media art gods!” she cried, rolling around on her bed.

“Do you want to?”

“Of course!” she exclaimed, immediately sitting up and giving me a serious expression. “Listen closely, Mizuto-kun. If you are not proficient at drawing, then you’ll be unable to draw anything lascivious!”

“Okay...?” I said hesitantly.

“Bad art does not make for true lascivious content! One must possess enough skill to realistically depict bodies entwining in carnal pleasure.”

She was brazenly declaring that she was breaking laws by consuming mature content as a minor.

“Why do you want to draw that kinda stuff in the first place?”

“Well, *obviously*, I’d like to see the nipples of my favorite heroines! Light novels tend not to receive too much fan art, so I must take matters into my own hands!”

I’d never met anyone so true to their adolescent horny desires as Higashira. “I guess I can’t really give you shit for your motivations... I don’t know anything about drawing, so I don’t have any advice, but you shouldn’t give up when you’re already this good.”

“Yes, but that would require practice, especially with rough sketches. I’d like to get better, but not through such troublesome activities.”

“No matter what you do, you gotta get the basics down first.”

“Such as drawing an apple? I’ve tried, but simply looking at one bores me.”

“You know you don’t have to use an apple to practice, right? Maybe try using something that’s not boring.”

“Hm... The only thing that comes to mind is you.”

“Yeah... Wait, what?” I’d reflexively agreed before my mind processed what she’d said.

Higashira tilted her head at my confusion. “I need a subject I’m interested in, right? That’d be you. I appreciate your cooperation!”

“Uh... Okay, fine...”

She really lived a carefree—or maybe a hesitation-free—life. But that was fine. I couldn't let myself be bothered by every last weird thing that Higashira did. She hopped off her bed and grabbed her tablet. Apparently, she preferred to do art digitally, rather than on paper.

"Have a seat!" She pulled out her desk chair for me before returning to the bed, sitting with her knees pointed upwards and her tablet on her thighs.

"Can you draw like that?"

"Absolutely. Please stay still, okay?"

She took the stylus in her hand and, after glancing between me and the tablet, began drawing.

"This is the first time I've ever used a real person as a subject. I'm a little nervous."

"So you usually draw from imagination? Impressive."

"No, I often use reference material. Accurately depicting the human body is quite the difficult feat."

"Oh, so do you look online for that kinda stuff?"

"Why go through that effort when I can simply use my own body?"

"Huh?"

"I pose and take pictures of myself to use as reference. Would you like to see?"

"No."

"Phew. That's a relief. I haven't edited them at all."

What exactly are you trying to draw? Also, if you don't want me to see them in the first place, don't ask!

"Truth be told, up until recently, I'd only been using that mirror over there as a way to take full-body shots. But now that I've received the guidance of Minami-san and Yume-san, I've been using it for its originally intended purpose as well."

My eyes shifted to the mirror on the wall. *I wonder what kind of poses she*

does. My mind began to wander, imagining her alone in this room...wearing all sorts of different outfits...striking pose after pose...with only her phone's camera bearing witness to— *I need to stop*. If I fantasized about her like *that*, I'd feel incredibly guilty, like I was rejecting the choice I'd made not to date her.

I knew Higashira would happily accept if I did change my mind, but for that to happen, I would have to be positive that it wasn't as a result of any impure feelings I may have had towards her.

"Heh heh heh... Mizuto-kun's body..." *Well, she certainly seems to have impure feelings*. "You really have a beautiful, slender body. Your thin fingers remind me of girls' hands from shojo manga."

"I'm just not muscular—I'm pretty much skin and bones."

"Hm... I suppose I'll just have to add some meat to you."

"Wait... I *am* wearing clothes in your drawing, right?"

"Well...drawing clothes is quite difficult."

"Hey!"

"Don't fret! I won't draw anything that needs to be censored! However, I suppose if you were to show me a sample of the real thing, then—"

"Hell no!"

Higashira deeply frowned in disappointment. *She's really not kidding, is she?* Higashira kept chattering away as she drew. It looked like she was having a blast. It reminded me of how excited Yume got when she took pictures of me. Seriously though, what was so fun about my body that caused them to act like this?

"Girls are so weird..." I muttered.

"I don't understand. What's weird about this? You're my first love, after all." Higashira tilted her head.

"Seriously, stop being so nonchalant about that."

"Surely you understand where I'm coming from, though. Has there not been someone you've wished to be in a relationship with?" She asked this so

naturally while looking back at her tablet and moving her stylus again.

I knew that Higashira wasn't a petty enough person to be bothered if I did have someone.

"No. There hasn't been."

"Why must you be dishonest? I clearly remember you saying that there was someone occupying your heart when you rejected me. I thought that you phrased that sentence very strangely, but in essence, you were saying that you were interested in someone, correct?"

All this time, I'd never checked with Higashira to see what she thought about what I'd said. Maybe I'd been foolishly hoping that Higashira of all people wouldn't get too invested, ruminating about the finer details of things.

"Well, you're wrong," I said, scoffing. "I'm not interested in anyone...right now."

"Right now?"

"You *really* wanna know?"

"Of course! I've been slightly interested all this time!"

"Just slightly? Why didn't you ask me sooner?"

"I haven't had the proper opportunity! I'd just been rejected, remember?"

"Oh right, sorry about that. Okay, I'll come clean, but...you won't get mad, right?"

"Huh?" She tilted her head. "No, I won't."

"Well, I had a girlfriend in middle school."

She was the only person I'd ever told. Her hands stopped moving and she slowly looked up at me.

"H-Huh?" Her mouth hung open. "A...girlfriend?"

"Yeah."

"A significant other?"

"Right."

“Yours?”

“Yep.”

Higashira flapped her mouth in disbelief. “Y-You’re lying!” She retreated until her back made contact with the wall. “I-It is completely out of the realm of possibility that an otaku like yourself had a girlfriend! I-It’s impossible!”

“Uh, didn’t you confess to this otaku?”

“Oh, true.” Higashira began to calm down.

Honestly, I’d expected her to be angry. She’d been under the impression that the two of us had similar lives, meaning that if she hadn’t dated anyone in middle school, then there was no chance that I would’ve either. But now, it was like I had betrayed her. I wasn’t sure how she’d react if I told her *who* I’d dated.

“I see...” she said. “You had a girlfriend. I must admit, I’m shocked.”

“I’m glad you’re only shocked.”

“I’d sincerely thought that you’d developed feelings for a girl who’d simply given you an eraser and weren’t ever able to shake those feelings. I was expecting a much more repulsive story.”

“Who in their right mind would go out with someone like that?!” I certainly wouldn’t want such an insane person occupying space in my heart.

Higashira started drawing again. “So I’m assuming you’ve since broken up with her?”

“Yeah, at graduation. Well, we were technically already pretty much broken up half a year before that.”

“Wow... I don’t believe I enjoy hearing such a raw story from you.”

“I can stop.”

“Good idea. Let’s not go any further.” *Huh? I expected her to say the opposite.*
“Hm, I see... So you rejected me...because of your ex?”

“Yeah...pretty much.”

“So, you’re still preoccupied with thoughts of your ex?”

“Ugh.”

“I see. You’re filled with unresolved feelings.”

“N-No...”

“Are you certain?”

It was just for a moment, but Higashira’s eyes looked sad. “You had strong feelings for her, didn’t you?” A look of jealousy flashed across her face. She was envious of a person who she—as far as she was aware, anyway—didn’t even know. “Knowing you, I’m sure your girlfriend was very kind, tactful, perceptive, and helpful, like a heroine in a shojo manga.” She stopped drawing again and looked up at the ceiling, as if she were imagining it. “Oh...” She exhaled. “That’s kind of...repulsive...”

“Wow, really?” *Is this not the part where you reflect on your own broken heart?*

“Hear me out: it’s repulsive because I’m imagining you as a handsome guy who is kind to girls. That’s a complete shift of character. It’s not who you are.”

“Well, yeah, it’s not who I am *now*.”

“Well, why not reprise that role, then?” She snickered.

“I don’t like the way you said that.” *Be careful what you wish for! Not my fault if you fall for me again!*

I may have been in the middle of modeling for her, but I wasn’t about to take this kind of abuse sitting down. I leaned over the edge of her bed, reached out, and lightly brushed her bangs out of her face.

“Show me more of your face.” I used the same kind of sweet voice that I had in the past. “A cute girl like you shouldn’t hide behind your bangs.” I looked straight into her eyes.

“Pfft.” She immediately covered her mouth, but wasn’t able to contain her laughter. “Aha! Aha ha ha ha! Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

“Stop laughing!” I gave her a light smack as she began clutching her stomach and rolling around on her bed. Sure, it may have *seemed* like a joke with how everything was going, but this was something I seriously used to do. *Oh god, I*

want to die!

“Ha ha! Phew. That was amusing. Would you like to try again?” she asked through another snicker.

“Hell no!”

“I believe you are much more suited to being the usual grump that you are. However, I will say that you could produce some potentially good ASMR content. If you try to record any dirty clips though, please do it just like that.”

“Hell no!”

A half smile crept across her face as she moved closer to me. She put her hand on my shoulder, leaned in, and whispered. “You’re much cooler the way you are now.”

“Huh?!”

“Was that close to your ex? Hm, I see, so this is what your ex was like. Did you really engage in these kinds of stupid conversations?”

“Shut up! All couples are stupid!”

“Heh heh. All right, then next, I’ll—”

“There is no ‘next.’ I’m done!”

“Ah!” she yelped as I ripped her hand off my shoulder and pushed my own hand against the bed. Her eyes widened. “If you had a girlfriend, does that mean that...you are experienced?!”

“No. We never got that far.”

“Ah, I see. No wonder you still have unresolved feelings.”

“That’s not why! Listen carefully: there’s a whole *different* reason and *different* circumstances that led to me rejecting you. I don’t have any unresolved feelings for that girl—”

“Ah.” Higashira suddenly turned to the side as if she were pulled by something, making me look in that direction too.

The door was slightly ajar, and looking in through the crack...was Natora-san.

“Good job, Isana, but you gotta be safe,” she said before throwing a box at us. It was certainly something that was part of the proper etiquette for night encounters. “It’s too early for you to have a kid. Anyway, get it, girl.” With that, she closed the door, not leaving any time for me to say anything.

“Hm?” Higashira looked curiously at the box that’d been thrown into her room. “Is that...” Higashira broke away from me and crawled off her bed towards the box. “Are these— Ah! They are!” Higashira’s face filled with joy as she inspected the box. “Please look, Mizuto-kun! Do you know what these are?! These are the kind you put on! I’ve never seen them before! Wow, so this is what they’re like? Amazing...”

“Yeah...”

Higashira opened the box before I could stop her and pulled out a string of square, wrapped items. “Look, Mizuto-kun!” she put the edge of one in her mouth. “Just like in the doujins!”

“Knock it off!”

“Ow!” Higashira spit it out after I quickly whacked her head. *How many lines do you have to cross today before you’re satisfied?!*

“Thanks for having me.”

“You could’ve stayed over. You had my mom’s permission.”

“I’m not brave enough to stay over at a home that I’m visiting for the first time,” I said at the entrance to her apartment building.

In the end, Natora-san kinda strong-armed me into having dinner with them. She nearly pushed me to take a bath too, which would’ve made it hard to go home, so I escaped before that could happen.

“I hope you visit again,” Higashira said, now wearing a cardigan over her clothes and lightly rubbing her arms for warmth.

“Yeah, hopefully next time there won’t be anyone around.”

“Oh, you. You’re so *filthy*,” she said, giggling while pressing the sleeves of her cardigan to her cheeks.

“Your embarrassed act could use a little more work.”

“We should play video games next time. Mom has some horror games. I’d love to see you frightened.”

“I don’t really get scared while playing horror games.”

“Oh, is that right? Could you say the same thing while playing it in VR?”

“VR, huh? Honestly, that sounds kinda fun.”

“Having a gamer for a parent is a real life hack. You don’t have to spend any of your allowance on games,” Higashira said, swaying happily.

I smiled a little, seeing her like this. As long as neither of us changed, our relationship would stay the same. Even if one of us confessed, rejected, fell in love, or was the recipient of any of those...our relationship would never be a temporary lapse of judgment.

“I’ll send you a message when you get back.”

“I’ll respond if I feel like it,” I said.

“Aw, don’t be like that. You *always* respond to my messages.”

“That’s because you spam crying stickers whenever I leave you on read.”

Higashira giggled. *I’m perfectly happy with how we are.*

Yume Irido

I heard the front door open around eight at night. I’d been restlessly waiting in the living room since after dinner. I quickly headed towards the entrance, where I found Mizuto taking off his shoes.

“You!” I hissed.

“Hm? Oh, I’m home.”

“Welcome back— No! You—”

“I what?”

“What are you doing out this late? You even said that you were going to eat while you were out. Mom wouldn’t tell me what she was grinning about

either!”

This was the first time he’d stayed out so late. I’d originally thought he might’ve been eating with Kawanami-kun, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that it was something else. Something *worse*. It didn’t help that mom had been grinning ear to ear. There was definitely something behind that smile.

“I was at Higashira’s,” he replied simply, completely ignoring my irritation while he walked inside. *Huh?* “Apparently her mom wanted to say hi since Higashira always comes over. I didn’t expect her to make food for me too. Oh, right.” Mizuto opened the door to the living room, walking past me as I froze in place. “Yuni-san. Or dad—it doesn’t really matter.”

“Oh, Mizuto-kun, welcome home! What’s up?” mom asked.

“Higashira’s mom wants to visit and say hi. Let me know what day works for you, and I’ll tell her.”

“Oh, really? Hm, just give me one second, okay? I’ll check,” she said, looking through her phone’s calendar.

I started to panic. “W-W-Wait!”

“Hm?” Mizuto shot me a confused look as I grabbed and yanked him in my direction.

“What are you *thinking*?! Don’t you remember what our parents think your relationship with Higashira-san is?!”

They still thought that she was his girlfriend. If that misunderstanding were to spread to her family as well...

“Ah...” Mizuto looked away from me as if he were trying to hide something. “About that...”

“Huh? What? What?! Tell me!”

“I think it’s a little late for that,” he said, sighing.

I didn’t need to ask him what he meant by that. Apparently, Higashira-san’s family was under the same impression as ours. *What the heck is going on?! How are things going smoother for her when I’m the one living with him?!*

The Ex-Couple House-Sit

“I’m a guy. Don’t forget that.”

Akatsuki Minami

Thirty minutes had passed since Yume-chan and I had sat down in this family restaurant.

“So, the thing is...”

“Uh-huh?”

“P-Promise not to laugh?”

“Of course! Don’t worry. Go on, tell me!”

“Well...”

“Yeah?”

“No...I can’t. This is too embarrassing.”

“You can do it, Yume-chan!”

“Do you really want to know?”

“I do, I do!”

I, Akatsuki Minami, love Yume-chan with all my heart. I wish to be with her every minute of the day. To be the only thing in the eyes of the girl with the body that every girl wants. To inject her voice into my veins.

Keep all that in mind when I say the following: this *sucked*. I wanted out.

Yume-chan had told me about an hour ago that she wanted to talk about something. I was so excited to see her again after all this time, so I’d wasted no time getting ready. After meeting up, I spent the first thirty minutes trying to ask her what she wanted to talk about, and the next trying to get her to talk about it. This felt like a filler arc.

Yume-chan's cuteness afforded my forgiveness for the first half hour. I would've smacked anyone else at least three times over. *Can you hurry up and get on with it? You're the one that called me here today. Don't you realize that I'm choosing to waste my time here?*

That being said, I understood why Yume was having so much trouble getting the words out. I had a faint idea what she wanted to talk to me about, but I couldn't just come right out and ask her. Instead, I let her drag things out. Yume-chan was never the type to cut straight to the chase. *You want relationship advice, don't you?*

Obviously. After all, she'd started calling Irido-kun by his first name all of a sudden. I'd only noticed a few days ago when she'd started messaging me after getting back from her family trip. Ever since then, I'd been slowly preparing myself for this day. I'd known it'd happen sooner or later. Yume-chan most likely tried to get his attention on her own, but it hadn't worked out. Higashira-san was extremely satisfied with her friendship status with Irido-kun, and I couldn't be Yume-chan's girlfriend. I was a little surprised it had taken this long for her to come to me for help.

But still... It hurt to know that in her mind, I'd been relegated to being the friend she went to for stuff like this. I wasn't sure if I could stay calm and give her actually good advice. I started thinking that maybe it'd be best for me to try and stay as neutral as possible and—

"So..." Yume-chan sounded much more resolute now. "The thing is..."

Finally. I was still burning with jealousy, but I refused to let it show. No matter what happened next, we'd still be friends. More than anything, I didn't want to see Yume cry. I needed to do everything I could to help her. Now, all I had to do is listen to her confession of love for Irido—

"Higashira-san and Mizuto are dating."

"Uh..." *Huh? Huh?!*

My mind went blank. All I could do was blink over and over again as if in a daze.

Yume-chan looked at me with confusion before coming to a realization. "Oh,

sorry. I should've explained more." She frantically waved her hands apologetically. *She's so cute.* "Our families *think* they're dating. Even her mom is totally convinced."

Oh, okay. I just jumped to conclusions. Their families are convinced that—
Wait, what? Why?

"How cliché." I dryly laughed while thinking about how stupid it was that Isana Higashira had somehow "won." "What *is* she? How are things going better for her after we stopped helping? Could she sense our ulterior motives or something?"

"Well, it's partially our fault for letting our parents run wild with their initial misunderstanding. We thought it was harmless and figured it would've been more annoying to explain the truth to them. But why did he have to go over to her place before we cleared it all up?!"

"Huh? Are you sure Irido-kun is bothered by this outcome? Usually when people think you're dating someone you aren't into, you shut that down fast."

"Oh... True..."

"Ah! W-Well at least, *most* people do. *Normal* people do, but Irido-kun's a special case. Who really knows!"

I could tell that my comment had made her feel bad, so I quickly tried to follow up with something to salvage the situation. *If you're going to be so transparent about your feelings, you should just come clean already!*

"It's hard to fix things when others have their own idea of what's going on, but it's even worse when the people involved don't do anything to set the record straight. If they don't care, they won't make any effort to try and fix the misunderstanding. Others will make their own assumptions, but that should be that. Nobody gets hurt."

"Yeah, but..."

"What do *you* want to do, Yume-chan?"

"I..." Her expression stiffened as she stroked her glass of orange juice. "I'm freaking out because I feel like I have to do *something*, but I don't know where

to start or what I even want to accomplish.”

“Hm...” *Yeah, this isn’t gonna be easy.*

I said nobody should get hurt, but that wasn’t true from Yume-chan’s perspective. If Yume-chan and Irido-kun were to start dating, he’d be seen as the guy who not only cheated on his girlfriend but also laid his hands on his own sister. The only way to clear up this misunderstanding was for the two people involved to do it themselves, but...

“I hate you so much, Irido-kun...” I muttered.

“Huh?”

“Yume-chan, you need to go straight to the source if you want to clear this up. You can’t do anything about it on your own. You need to go to them—well, Irido-kun, at least—and get him in the mood to take action.”

“‘Get him in the mood’?”

“Make him feel like this whole ordeal is getting in the way of what he really wants. So, basically,” I said, sticking up my index finger, “make him feel the same as you.”

“Uh... What?” Yume-chan blinked over and over, freezing for about ten seconds. “The same as...me?”

“Yep.”

“U-Uh, wait. Wh-What do you mean by that?”

A grin spread across my face. “You know *exactly* what I mean.”

Her face turned a deep shade of red before dropping flat on the table. She let out a long groan.

“Chill, chill,” I added. “This stays between us. I promise.”

“How... How did you know?”

“You’re not exactly Fort Knox; you’re an open book.”

“Nooo!”

Argh, how can she be so cute?! Screw you, Irido-kun, but thanks for giving me

the opportunity to see Yume-chan like this.

“By the way, what happened on your family trip?” I asked. “Your entire attitude did a one-eighty.”

“Am I really acting all that differently?”

“Yeah, that’s what it feels like.”

“Well...” Yume-chan slowly sat up and began brushing her long black hair out of her face. “Nothing happened...per se.”

“Aw, don’t be like that. C’mon, you can tell me.”

“Oh, but, uh... You have to promise not to tell anyone, okay?”

Crap. I might’ve just kicked the hornet’s nest. I knew she was dying to tell me what had happened, despite her reluctant facade. Even worse, Yume-chan had filed me away as the one she could talk about romantic stuff with. I’d screwed up. It was too late for me.

“So, here’s what happened...”

“And like, his face was all nonplussed, but his heart was pounding! He always makes fun of my body, but ha! Serves him right!”

Yume-chan started cracking up at my story. *Phew, I feel so much better! Glad I could get that gaudy idiot’s stupidity off my chest... Wait. Wasn’t she supposed to tell me a story?! Why am I the one sharing?*

“Did anything else happen between you two?” she asked.

“Aw, I guess *something* happened, but it wasn’t anything too special.”

“Oh, don’t be like that. C’mon, you can tell me.”

“Hm... Well...” Suddenly I had a moment of clarity in the midst of the laughs we were having as I recounted my experiences. “Full stop! Why am I the one sharing right now?!”

“Uh... I don’t see the problem.”

“We’re supposed to be talking about how to get Irido-kun to come clean about his fake relationship!”

“Oh... Right. Sorry, I was just having so much fun that it slipped my mind.”

Yeah, me too! It's fun to get together with a friend and dish about romance—
Wait, no. What romance? There's nothing romantic going on in my life! I swear!

“We were talking about what you should specifically do, remember?” I said, trying to get us back on track.

“Right... What should I do?”

“Well, first thing's first. You gotta make up with him. You get pretty pissy when you're trying to hide your embarrassment. It's like a defense mechanism. You get so cold.”

Yume-chan groaned in response. Truth be told, my soul had left my body when she told me about how she'd kissed him during their family trip, but the pain I felt then wasn't nearly as bad as how I felt when she told me *why*. *How are you so bad at expressing yourself?! Sure, it's cute, but still! Also, what the hell, Irido-kun?! How can you be so dense?! Why are you asking her why she kissed you? There's only one frickin' reason to kiss someone!*

“But how am I supposed to make up with him?” she asked.

“Don't think about it too hard. I'm pretty sure he's a bigger pushover than you think.”

“You really think so?”

“Yep! He'll forgive and forget as long as you're sincere. I don't have any specific advice about what to do, though, 'cause you know him better than I do.”

“I do?”

“You've been living with him for how many months now? Something's had to have happened to close the distance between you two. When did you feel the closest to him?”

Yume quietly repeated my words as she fell into thought. *Seriously, why do I gotta be the one giving advice?* I'd already gotten an idea about how Yume-chan really felt when we helped Higashira-san with her confession. She had been really conflicted about whether she wanted Higashira-san's confession to

work out or not.

“Oh.”

“Got something?” I asked.

“Well...” She averted her eyes, maybe out of a lack of confidence. “So... When we first started living together, there was a time when we had to house-sit—just the two of us.”

Oh god, I almost just vomited blood.

“Phew...” I stared at the ceiling as condensation dripped down into the bathtub.

I hope Yume-chan’s doing okay. I submerged my mouth and blew bubbles. *I just had to give her that advice.* Irido-kun was supposed to be my enemy. I missed the days when I had tried to get him to marry me back in April.

My blood boiled at the thought of what Yume-chan was doing to Irido-kun right now. At the same time, though, I sincerely hoped that everything would work out. My feelings were all over the place. I was an emotional mess.

I didn’t necessarily want to *date* Yume-chan. I mean, if she asked me out, I’d instantly say yes. That’d be a no-brainer, but at the same time, I was afraid of a certain emotion rearing its ugly head. Jealousy.

It wasn’t that I was jealous of her crushing on others; I was jealous of her ties to her family. Now that I thought about it, I was probably incredibly jealous of other families in general—people who are with you through thick and thin. I wanted a taste of that, which is probably why I had thought marrying Irido-kun would be the best course of action.

When I had asked him out back in April, I was still burdened by my massive failures in middle school. I’d be lying if I said that some small part of me didn’t want to make up for everything I’d done back then, but right now...

“Hey, you done in there?”

“Sheesh, I’ll be out soon! Don’t get your panties in a bunch!” I replied to Ko-kun as I stood up.

You could let me take it easy for a little longer, you stingy bastard. Yeah, sure, this is your place, but seriously. Since we both found it really annoying to fill an entire bathtub just for ourselves, we'd been taking turns. Some days he'd take a bath at my place and others, I'd go to his. This was a give-and-take kind of situation. *I let you take a bath at my place, so you can at least let me take my time in yours.*

This wasn't something we did until about a month ago, after the study camp ended. It was like we'd returned to how we used to be. The only thing was that his weird allergy hadn't gone away.

"Hm..." I began wiping myself down with a towel while thinking. "I wonder if his allergy's gotten any better..."

Yume Irido

I finished wiping myself down with a towel before wrapping it around my body.

"All set."

This was what I'd come up with after talking with Akatsuki-san. In the five or so months that I'd lived with Mizuto, the time that I'd felt the closest to him wasn't when I kissed him at the festival. It was when we started living together. I'd wanted to tease him a little, so I'd put a bath towel on, gone out into the living room, and...well, a lot *almost* happened.

The scene began replaying in my head.

"W-We can't. The rules..." I'd said.

"I'm okay with losing today," he'd said.

I hid my face as I stood in front of the mirror. Thinking about it, that was a really crazy memory. If our parents hadn't come home practically right at that moment, we would've... *Ugh, this is the problem with teenagers!* We'd been broken up for a full month, but we'd almost let our lust get the better of us!

But what I was doing right now was fully dependent on that adolescent lust. I needed Mizuto to *want* to fix the misunderstanding about him and Higashira-san. I'd concluded that the best way to persuade him was to seduce him. What

better way was there to get a guy to do something?

It was a simple plan, and everything had fallen perfectly into place. It was almost as if a higher power was supporting my efforts. Our parents were both apparently coming back late today. I'd learned from my mistakes, though, and made sure to confirm that they didn't expect to be back until after ten.

I had until then to complete my mission and retreat to safety. I dubbed this the "titillate and run" strategy. I definitely wasn't scared of climbing the stairway to adulthood. I simply wanted to wait, after taking everything into consideration and all.

It's go time! I confidently walked out of the bathroom and headed to the living room. It was quiet, but I'd seen Mizuto earlier reading a book on the couch. He should've still been there. I opened the door and sure enough, he was in the exact same position I'd left him in.

"I'm done," I declared.

"Mm-hmm." Mizuto shot me a glance. *What do you think? The last time you saw me like this, you spit out your tea.* "I'm gonna wait a little before taking mine." Mizuto's eyes calmly went back to his book.

Uh... What? Did he not notice? Maybe he looked too fast and it didn't really sink in what I'm wearing? "Whew...it's hot," I said as I sat down on the couch, making sure to be in his field of vision.

What now? You can see me clearly, can't you? Look at these thighs! Look at me shifting my legs! But Mizuto continued reading his book without looking up once. *H-How dare you?! Okay, then what about this?* I reached for the bottle of tea on the table, making sure to stay low enough for him to see my cleavage. *There's no way you can ignore me now! I know you're interested in my chest, especially since you stole my bra back then!*

Mizuto did glance at me. *Yes, finally! I knew it, you closet per—*

"Here," he said, pushing the bottle towards my hand.

"Th-Thanks..."

All I could do was pour the tea out into a cup. In the meantime, Mizuto calmly

returned to his book. *What the heck is this?! You were so fidgety back then! You kept stealing glance after glance, but now you're practically ignoring me! Look at me! Do you know how embarrassing this is?!*

I gulped down the tea in an effort to calm down. This was about when I gave up, but I couldn't let things end here. I still had a plan. If he was going to ignore me until I gave up, I'd have to create a situation where he *had* to look at me.

"Hey," I called out to him.

"Hm?"

"Could you...help me dry my hair?"

Akatsuki Minami

"Seriously? Dry your own hair."

"Oh, come on. You don't know what it's like having long hair. Please? I never ask."

Ko-kun turned the hair dryer on and warm air blew on my hair as I sat on the couch, wrapped in nothing but a towel. He ruffled my hair. His technique—if you could call it that—was all over the place, but I couldn't complain. It still felt nice. It'd been a hot second since anyone besides the stylists at the beauty salon had dried my hair.

"Y'know, you could at least wear some real clothes. This isn't your house," he grumbled, sitting behind me.

"Gimme a break—it's frickin' hot. What, can't take your eyes off my body?"

"Yep. Can't stop looking. Too worried that your towel's gonna fall off that smooth cylinder you call a body because it doesn't have anything to latch on to—ow!"

I landed a blow to his side with my elbow. I stretched my legs across the couch as he hunched over me and pointed the hair dryer down. When we were younger, he had to sit on his knees to be taller than me while we were sitting. Now, though, he was just naturally taller.

If I fell backwards, my head would probably land on his knees. How would he react? *I'm kinda curious, but I'll wait until he's done drying my hair at least.* I

looked down to see my thighs, which the towel neglected to cover. I may not have had the most developed chest, but I was secretly very confident about my legs. Even my childhood friend with his strange affliction would find himself at least a little bit aroused by them.

Honestly, I'd been doing some thinking about his allergy and how far one could go before it was triggered. Radiating an aura of romantic interest would definitely make his allergy flare, but would "unwittingly" seducing him do the same?

His libido couldn't have been nonexistent. His heart wouldn't have been beating so fast at the pool otherwise. My guess was that something like getting a glimpse of panties would be okay as long as he thought it wasn't intentional, meaning that I was safe as long as he thought my actions had no romantic motivation behind them.

I wanted to test it out. If we were going to continue to be around each other, it was important to know where to draw the line. This had nothing, *absolutely* nothing, to do with me wanting him to treat me like he used to. This was all so I could tease him by playing to the edge of what would trigger his allergy, making him just horny enough that he wouldn't want to be home alone. If he could no longer hold back and gave into his urges, all I'd have to do is go along with it and he'd probably self-destruct from his allergy. Easy peasy.

"Hey," I said, moving my arm behind me so I could twist my body and tilt my head to look up at him. We were so close. The towel I was wearing didn't really leave too much to the imagination. "You know how there's a culture festival right after school starts again? Do you know what our class is doing?"

I raised my knees to flaunt my thighs. My towel was in a position such that it was just barely covering what it needed, which might not have been great since I wasn't wearing anything underneath.

Then again, I didn't care much if he saw me naked. Sure, I'd be embarrassed, but I was pretty sure that in his mind, nudity wasn't nearly as hot as being scantily clad.

Ko-kun looked into my eyes. "Dunno. We pretty much have free rein over whatever we wanna do."

“So that means we could do food-type things, right? Whaddya think about a maid café?”

“I’ve never seen maid cafés outside of manga.” He paused. “Actually, nah, there *was* one last year, or so I heard.”

“I feel like the more prestigious the school, the more anything goes.”

I was making it seem like this was a normal conversation, but I was closely watching his eyes. He’d already glanced at my thighs three times. He was doing his best not to look at them, but he obviously couldn’t help himself.



Hm... Looks like my guess is right on the money. He's fine as long as he can't sense any romantic intention behind actions. Also...he still ogles me like this now? Interesting. In that case...

"I wonder what kinda outfit would look best on Yume-chan. I wouldn't want her to wear anything *too* revealing." I took the opportunity to adjust my butt's position, moving it closer to him and bumping my tailbone against his pelvis in the process.

"She'd only wear clothes like that in front of Irido." His hands grazed my scalp as he continued drying my hair. Maybe it was just me, but it felt like he was being gentler than before.

"Ugh, you just can't resist shipping people, can you?" I shook my head. "Anyway, I dunno how many people from other schools or other grades you'll run into, but be careful not to get hit on."

"Yep. You should watch out too."

"Huh? You're worried about me being hit on?"

"Nah, I'm saying you should watch out and make sure *Irido-san* doesn't get hit on. No way in hell is anyone gonna hit on you."

"Screw you! Of course I'm gonna be hit on! It happens every now and then...by creeps."

"It's 'cause you look so young!" he said, stroking the hair behind my left ear.

Got one right here. While running his hands through my hair, he stroked the back of my ear with his thumb as if he was giving it a massage. Then, he began rubbing my earlobes. *I wonder what he's thinkin' about. Maybe he's imagining touching me somewhere else... Just kidding.*

"Ahn!" I decided to moan a little as a freebie.

He immediately moved his fingers away from my ear. *Heh heh. How fun.*

"Should be dry enough..." Ko-kun turned the hair dryer off.

Looks like this is about as far as he can take it. This experience had been very informative. From now on, if I wanted to tease him, I'd have to do it without

him interpreting it as a romantic gesture.

“Hey,” he called out in a low voice, making me jump and squeak in surprise. “If you’re serious about guys creepin’ on you...I want you to be more careful.”

“Wh-What are you getting all serious for? I was just messing around.”

“Really? Okay.” Suddenly I felt his breath against my ear. “Maybe I should give you a hickey so other guys won’t hit on you.”

I felt a current run up my spine. I felt his breath slowly move from my ear to my neck, to my clavicle—

“S-Stop being stupid!” I freaked out and moved away, turning to look at him. “If you did that, I wouldn’t even be able to go to school!” I put my hand over the spot on my neck where I’d last felt his breath.

Ko-kun grinned. “What’re you gettin’ all serious for? I was just messing around.”

“H-Huh?!”

“I was just thinking about how you gave me a hickey in middle school. Sheesh, that was a time and a half. I tried popping my collar and everything else I could think of, but all I did was draw more attention to myself.”

Now that he mentions it... Yeah, I think I remember doing that. I’d been pretty excited about it too. I’d thought I could keep all the girls off of him if I did that.

“This was gonna be my way of gettin’ back at you, but I guess there’s no point since no one’s gonna see it anyway, unless summer break somehow ends early.”

Really? You weren’t so turned on that you wanted to kiss me? You weren’t lusting after the nape of my neck? Even if he had been, he’d never say it out loud. If he wanted to play it all off as a joke, then that was that.

But then I realized something—a certain possibility. If Ko-kun actually wanted to start *something* and was all over me as a result...wouldn’t I need to keep pretending not to be into him so his allergies wouldn’t trigger? *Oh, god... That sounds like hell.*

Yume Irido

The hot air from the dryer blew against my hair.

“So, why do I have to dry your hair again?”

“I-It’s hard to dry it by myself when it’s this long. Can’t a girl just get a break once in a while?”

Mizuto’s thin fingers ran through my hair. Even though it wasn’t as intense as skin-on-skin contact, my heart was beating faster regardless. His fingers were so gentle—the complete opposite of whatever came out of his mouth. *Why am I the one whose heartbeat’s getting faster?! I need him to be the one getting flustered!*

According to Akatsuki-san, no matter how emotionless he acted, showing him my unguarded back would have him sneaking glances. He hadn’t been looking at me in any particular way when I’d come into the living room, but now that he was in my blind spot, he had to have been looking at the nape of my neck, my shoulders, or my cleavage! All I had to do was catch him in the act and that’d give me the emotional upper hand.

I slightly turned to look at Mizuto, but all I saw was him staring at my hair, calm as ever. He didn’t look like a person who was getting aroused by my bare skin. This was starting to piss me off a little.

Here I was, doing something that I wasn’t used to in the slightest, but he couldn’t be bothered to give me even a little bit of a reaction?! This wasn’t normal! He wasn’t this calm just a few months ago! But if this was how he wanted to play things, then I knew what I had to do next. I loosened my towel a little bit. I wasn’t trying to take it off completely—I simply wanted it to be just a smidgen looser. I’d just be making it look a little messed up.

After a little bit, I succeeded in separating the towel from my body slightly. I took my hand off it and began looking at my phone. *You want to look, don’t you? You’re interested, aren’t you? Of course you are!* But still, I didn’t feel any change in his movements. I turned my phone on and quickly switched to the front-facing camera. Immediately, I saw his eyes flicker away. *He is looking!*

This gave me a boost of confidence, so I puffed out my chest. *I won! Serves*

you right, you closet pervert! If you're so interested, you should've looked at me from the start. Ah, I feel so much better. I wasn't free yet, though. I may have won the battle, but I hadn't won the war. I had to make sure I didn't loosen my grip on the situation and— Wait, loosen? Suddenly, I felt a totally different sense of *freedom*. Something had been released from my bath towel.

"Huh?" My towel fell onto the couch.

My body was fully exposed. My skin that was still flush from the bath was out in the open, and with it...the strapless bra and shorts I'd been wearing.

"Huh?"

I quickly pulled the towel back up. *Th-The jig is up.* Sure, it was embarrassing for him to see me in these clothes, but more than that, it was awkward that he'd seen that I was wearing them under the towel. I broke into a cold sweat. In the event of the unexpected happening, I'd put these on as insurance. Now he knew that I'd come here with the intent to seduce him.

"Uh-huh... I see. Mm-hmm. I see." Mizuto turned the hair dryer off. His cold voice was the only thing I could feel on my back now. "How simple."

I winced as I took psychological damage.

"So you tried repeating what you thought worked in the past, thinking that I'd fall for it again?"

I winced once more.

"I don't know if you were just trying to mess with me or make me fall prey to our rules, but either way...if you're gonna try to seduce me, you should at least do a good job. You were so obviously nervous. I was trying to be considerate."

I cringed so hard. *Would it kill you to be a little more delicate with your words?* But I'd taken so much damage, I couldn't bring myself to fight back at all.

"Yume." My name coming from his mouth was still so unfamiliar to me. Something inside me began stirring. "I've gotten better at playing things off thanks to the time I've spent with Higashira."

My heart jumped. *S-So he wasn't ignoring me? He was actually...*

“I’m gonna tell you what I tell her all the time.” His voice was lower than usual and pierced deep into my brain. “I’m a guy. Don’t forget that.”

Wha— What the heck was that? His voice is still ringing in my head. I-I can’t—

“I’m gonna take my bath now. You should get dressed before you catch a cold.” Suddenly, he was back to his normal self, and with that, he left the living room.

I fell to the couch as soon as I couldn’t sense him around anymore.



This is so...unfair! Telling me that is so underhanded! It should be banned—a crime! Did he do it on purpose? Is this payback? Is it because I tried to seduce him? It's too mean, though! Argh! This is exactly why Higashira-san likes you! What's gonna happen to me if you stop trying to play things off?!

Incidentally, I remained on the couch, rolling around agonizing about this until mom got home.

Akatsuki Minami

“Later. G’night,” he said as I left.

If we were still dating, he definitely would’ve let me stay over. It wasn’t like I had to go very far to get home, though. In less than ten seconds, I was already finding myself collapsing onto my bed. *How am I going to cure his weird allergy?*

I was the one who had caused it to appear in the first place, so it’d make sense if I helped cure it too. Really, it didn’t matter to me if he was cured or not. But it’d definitely be annoying if he misinterpreted things and I caused his allergies to flare up.

Oh, yeah. Wonder how Yume-chan’s doing. If things had gone well, right now, she and Irido-kun would be... *I need to interrupt them. The ringtone will snap them back to their senses.* I picked up my phone and called Yume-chan. I’d be surprised if she ignored the call or immediately hung up, but before I knew it, I heard the click of her picking up.

“Hello?”

“Yume-chan? You okay right now?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

She didn’t sound frantic or anything. More importantly, she sounded like she was alone. I felt relieved.

“How’d it go? Tell me how it went.”

“Well... Y’know... Ehe heh heh...”

Huh? Why is she nervously giggling? She sounds embarrassed, but as if she

wants *me to press further. No way...right? There's no way that...*

"So...did it go well?"

"Uh... I guess you could say that?"

"Huh? What does that mean?"

I heard Yume giggle from the other side of the phone. *I don't want a giggle! I want an explanation! Speak, girl!*

"Well, he told me not to forget that he's a guy."

"Huh?" *Did I cut out or something? That can't be it...wait. Wait!*

"So yeah, the plan didn't work at all, *and* he knew what I was doing from the start. But you know, I was actually able to get a rise out of him. He's just good at hiding it. He was being considerate of me because he's a guy."

"Uh... What? Huh? What the heck?" Imagining it made my heart skip a beat. *What is this? A one-liner from a rom-com movie trailer?*

"Is Irido-kun a shojo manga protagonist or something?" I asked.

"I know, right?! The fact that he said that all so naturally and effortlessly is scary."

"Kinda pisses me off that his cute looks are starting to match his actions. Can you guess what I heard today?"

"Huh? Did you do the same thing to Kawanami-kun today?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah. Well, just on a whim. So, we ended up talking about getting hit on, and then he was all like, 'Maybe I should give you a hickey so other guys won't hit on you.' Gross, right?"

"Huh?! Isn't that hot? Like, really hot?!"

"Maybe for you, Yume-chan."

"Sure, but I bet I'm not the only one who would think that."

"Hm, you think so? Well, I guess I didn't *hate* it."

"Aw, you should be more honest."

"*He's the one who's not honest! He always laughs everything off!*"

I was pissed that Irido-kun had caught Yume-chan's heart like that. It was basically hell for me to have to sit and hear her talk about her problems and then for me to give advice. But...maybe it wasn't so bad exchanging secrets with Yume-chan like this.

Commemoration

“Could we take a picture of...the three of us?”

Mizuto Irido

As summer break drew closer to its end, I was forcibly reminded of that day two years ago—August 27th, the day I received my very first love letter. A foolish yet happy memory in which I was still naive and believed in love. But that wasn't the *only* August 27th that stuck out in my mind—last year's did too.

On August 27th last year, I didn't get any LINE messages or anything, and I realized that the events of the first August 27th had become nothing but a distant memory. I didn't feel sad or mournful; I was a husk steeped in a lukewarm nostalgia, even though it was supposed to be a day we celebrated together. Our anniversary.

But even so, the two of us were too immature. We had no right to celebrate our anniversary. And thus, last year's August 27th wasn't the celebration of our relationship's beginning, but rather its end. It was the day that I broke free from the romantic daze I'd been in—that my heart stopped beating for someone else.

Yume Irido

August 27th grew closer, as did the end of summer vacation. Looking at my phone's calendar, I was reminded of both the happiest and saddest memories of my life.

On that day two years ago, I had confessed for the first time—and succeeded. Last year had been a hollow day during which I had done nothing but dwell on the lingering feelings inside me. But not this year. This year was going to be different.

Gone was the cowardly little girl who had prayed for him to miraculously show up. I'd become strong—capable of going on the offensive. I wasn't going

to wait for someone else to come along and do things for me. *I'd* be the one to make things happen.

It'd be exactly two years after I first confessed to him. I couldn't imagine a better chance. I'd drag him out of the house he never wanted to leave and make him forget that we were stepsiblings, if only for a little bit. I had to!

"Where should we go, I wonder..." What'd be a good place to hang out? Okay, who am I fooling? What would be a good place to go on a date? I began punching my inquiry into my phone.

Our aquarium date had been pretty fun despite everything that'd happened, but could I replicate that success? For example, if I tried to invite him to an amusement park, I was certain he'd immediately decline. I needed to think of a place that he'd actually be interested in that could double as a date spot. But first...was his schedule even open for a date?

I'd been assuming he wouldn't have any plans, but I'd completely forgotten about a certain existence that had been taking up his time. He wasn't the same guy as he was in middle school. He actually had people to hang out with now. Gone were the days when he was always by his lonesome.

I needed to check his availability first so as to not get turned down on the spot. To do that, I opened my LINE chat with him, since we'd agreed to communicate through it at night. I was a little glad we'd made that rule, because it was a lot more discreet than going to his room and asking him.

I took some time to think about what to write.

Yume: Do you have plans to go out any time soon?

I hesitated sending it because it sounded a little off, but I decided to just go with it. After a few seconds, I saw that he read my message, and a reply came not too long after.

Mizuto: Yeah.

Huh? No way...right? I nervously typed back to him.

Yume: When?

Mizuto: The 27th.

I felt so dizzy I couldn't see straight. Mizuto continued typing.

Mizuto: Higashira wants to see a movie.

A movie?! He was interested in going to the theater and it doubled as a date spot. Why didn't I think of that?! I shook my head, trying to regain my composure instead of admiring Higashira-san's idea. She'd beaten me to the punch. How was I supposed to ask him to keep that day open if he already had plans?

I let out a slow, sad, lonely sigh. I felt so hurt. August 27th was special no more. But why would it be? We had no reason to celebrate the day we first started dating when we'd already broken up, so why would he keep that day open?

I spaced out for an indeterminate amount of time, lamenting the truth I'd failed to consider. Mizuto, who was perceptive to these kinds of things, must have realized something was up. I hadn't responded for a while, so he sent another message.

Mizuto: Should I keep that day open?

Blood rushed to my head as soon as I read his message.

Yume: Why are you asking me?

My fingers moved practically automatically, putting my frustrations in writing.

Yume: You want to hang out with Higashira-san on that day, don't you? You made that choice. Are you gonna go back on your plans just because I ask you to? Isn't that unfair to her?!

I wasn't sure why I was blowing up at him, but one thing was certain: I couldn't forgive him. I couldn't forgive him for becoming the kind of guy who would toss away plans with his good friend for his stupid ex-girlfriend. *He's acting nice towards Yume Ayai—not me.*

After a few minutes, Mizuto sent a response.

Mizuto: You're right. Sorry.

Though his message was brief, I could sense that he was extremely remorseful. I deeply exhaled, cooling my head. I might've messed up. He might've left the day open for me if I'd asked. Hadn't that been my entire plan? I'd wanted to go on a date with him then. *No, thinking like that is cowardly.*

I'd sworn to myself that I'd surpass Yume Ayai. I'd make him love the current me more than he'd ever loved my old self. If that was my goal, then I had no reason to rely on past anniversaries. Maybe it was good that he had plans. It meant that he didn't have any lingering attachments to who I used to be. *That still kinda rubs me the wrong way, though...*

"A movie..."

She'd really thought things through. Actually, no, this was *Higashira-san* we were talking about. She definitely wasn't considering this a date. Her only objective was to watch a movie with her friend. But then again, wasn't this the first time that they'd be doing something date-like?

Sure, they may have hung out together in the school library, walked home together, and visited each others' houses, but they hadn't gone somewhere *outside* those environments.

I opened my chat with Higashira-san. As a former collaborator in her efforts to date him, I figured I should give her some words of encouragement. It would be their first date after all. This had absolutely—*absolutely*—nothing to do with me feeling bitter about being the odd man out.

Yume: I heard you're going to see a movie with Mizuto. Good luck!

Look at how effortlessly I typed this message. Look how different I am from the brat who saw red when her boyfriend spent a little time with another girl.

Higashira-san almost immediately replied.

Izanami: Yes, we are! Would you like to join us?

"Uh..." No way...right? Even if she didn't see it that way, she couldn't have thought I'd be so socially inept as to insert myself into their first date.

Yume: Yeah, count me in!

Mizuto Irido

I looked up at the blue sky from the bus stop's bench. Cars passed by in front of me as I waited. There was a new part of the plan that had been shoved in my face. Initially, Higashira and I were going to meet up at the movie theater, but wouldn't you know it, a certain stepsister had suddenly joined our group. She'd called Higashira over and kicked me out of the house, leaving me to wait here.

I'd be pissed if I weren't so confused by what'd happened. I wasn't stupid—I knew the significance of today, but it shouldn't have meant anything now that we were stepsiblings. That was why I'd accepted Higashira's invitation.

Never in my wildest dreams had I expected Higashira to invite *her*, though, nor had I expected her to accept. Apparently, it happened almost immediately after she'd messaged me last night. I was beginning to doubt that the word

“shameless” existed in her dictionary. She’d gone on a written tirade, telling me to prioritize Higashira, and then turned around and joined us. But since Higashira was the one who had invited her, neither of us could really say anything.

Still, though, going to the movies with two girls—albeit a friend and my stepsister—was...new. I never would’ve imagined going out with other people a year and a half ago. We were only planning to watch the movie and then go home, at least. I didn’t have to worry about staying on guard *all day*.

“We’re here.”

I turned my head to see the two girls looking down at me. Yume was wearing pants—a new style for her—with her long black hair tied up in a ponytail. Her shirt sleeves were also shorter than what she usually wore—they just barely covered her shoulders. Overall, her outfit gave off a much more mature look.

Higashira was wearing a loose green shirt with a flowing beige skirt. Her outfit reminded me of that of a villager in some kind of RPG. Usually she’d wear a sweatshirt and pants or a really baggy T-shirt, so I was surprised to see her wearing such a fashionable outfit. She’d said so many times that she didn’t care about her appearance, after all. I could tell from the glint off her lips that she’d even put on some lip gloss. She’d also put something around her eyes that made them pop more than usual.

“I see. You kicked me out of the house so you could dress Higashira up.”

“Of course. Left to her own devices, she’d wear sweats.”

“Would that really be such poor attire? We’re merely viewing a film...”
Higashira pouted.

“It would be! You can wear whatever you want at home, but if you’re going out, you have to actually try.”

“That is too heavy a burden...” Higashira dejectedly hung her shoulders.

Girls really have it rough. If Higashira was a guy, nobody would give her any crap if she wore the same clothes in and out of the house.

“Ahem,” Yume snapped at me as I got lost in my thoughts. “Don’t you have

anything you want to say?" Yume lightly pushed Higashira forward.

She sheepishly blinked as she looked at me. She was obviously at a loss for what to do, and so was I. Yes, there was something I could have said in this situation, but...

"I've already complimented that outfit before."

"Indeed, he has," Higashira agreed.

"Compliment her *today*, then!"

Today? We weren't talking about constantly changing factors like the weather or temperature. People's appearances were much more static than that. I could tell that Yume wouldn't drop this until I said something, though, so I searched inside me for the right words.

"Hmm. Better than your usual sweatshirt."

"*That's* the best you can do?!" Yume screeched.

Higashira happily giggled.

"That was a really bad compliment, Higashira-san! Don't set the bar so low!"

I can't put my finger on it, but Yume's a lot more annoying than usual today.

Just as I thought that, she shifted her eyes back to me. "What about me?"

"Huh?"

"What. About. Me?"

Crap. This entire sequence of events was all for this. If I complimented Higashira on her outfit, then I had to compliment Yume too. *You crafty bastard.* I looked at Yume in her mature outfit and tried to form words.

"It's rare..."

"Huh?"

"It's rare to see your hair tied back."

Yume lightly touched her hair. "Yeah...true. I try not to copy Akatsuki-san when we're together."

"I see."

“Do you like ponytails?”

Her intentions with that question were so obvious that it caught me off guard. I did have an answer prepared, but I had a feeling that with the way this conversation was going— Higashira tilted her head. “Haruhi?”

“Pfft!” I couldn’t hold it in.

Yume looked confused. “Huh? What? What was so funny?”

“You really should read some classics from the 2000s.”

“I too am very much a fan of ponytails. Having sight of the nape of the neck is ever so sexy. Heh heh heh.”

“Could you two stop with your inside jokes?!”

Jokes aside, the ponytail really did look good on her. Seriously. There was no way in hell I was ever gonna tell her that, though.

We got onto the bus single file when it arrived.

“Oh, there are some vacancies in the rear.”

“Let’s go.”

Higashira and Yume pointed to the long seat in the back of the bus, leaving me to go with the flow as the last person to board. *Okay, so Higashira’ll sit on the inside, Yume will sit next to her, and I’ll sit next to Yume.*

“Here we go,” Yume said.

For some reason, Higashira and Yume sat one seat apart from each other, leaving me to sit in the middle. *Uh...why?* It was hard to refuse when Higashira was happily patting the seat, gesturing for me to sit there.

“You must be quite the happy guy to have a beautiful lady on either side of you.”

“Yeah, isn’t this nice?” Yume giggled teasingly.

“People who are actually beautiful don’t refer to themselves as such.”

“Mizuto-kun, you should fold your arms and puff out your chest triumphantly.

I'll cling to your arm."

"I get it now. You're trying to recreate the typical covers of isekai harem light novels."

"I can't believe you guessed that..." Yume said.

As the bus began moving, I noticed Higashira peeking at Yume as she swayed with the movements of the bus.

"By the way, how much otaku knowledge do you possess, Yume-san? I understand you hardly consume any light novel content, however, does that apply to manga as well?"

"I'm not too familiar with the culture or references. The most I know comes from the *Urazometenma* series."

"Pardon?"

"She's talking about a mystery series in which an otaku high school detective solves murders as a way to earn money for Blu-rays and anime goods," I explained.

"Oh. I was unaware such a series existed. How intriguing!"

"It's pretty much the same vibe as a light novel, just without any illustrations."

"Do you want to borrow it?" Yume asked. "I like that series."

"Could I? I've yet to really dip more than a toe in the mystery genre."

Yume and Higashira started getting really into their conversation and began leaning towards each other. As a result, I felt a soft sensation pressing into me on either side. I did my best to shrink my shoulders so as to avoid them.

"Mysteries have always been very character-driven. I think they'd be pretty easy for you to get through," Yume said.

"But people perish in them, do they not?"

"You don't like stories where people die?"

"It's not so much that I'm against them, it's that I tend to prefer happy endings. I feel that if there are deaths, it's difficult for everyone to be happy."

“Ah, I see. But there are mysteries in which people don’t die.”

“Yeah, but even in those kinds of mysteries, there’s usually a bittersweet ending,” I chimed in.

“Is it so wrong for stories to have the victims be revived upon the mystery being solved?” Higashira asked.

“I doubt it’d be a good story, but...I’m sure it exists somewhere,” Yume said.

The next moment, she placed her hand on my arm. *What are you doing?* I wouldn’t have paid too much attention if this was Higashira, but Yume of all people would never initiate physical contact for no reason. For the time being, I chose to ignore her and continue the conversation as if nothing was happening.

“There are books in which it turns out that the person who supposedly died is alive the entire time too. Plus, there’s some in which the characters go back in time to prevent a crime from happening.”

“Oh, I love time travel!”

“Me too!” Yume agreed.

“I truly believe that the best stories are those in which everyone is happy in the end, and I apply that to both light novels and traditional literature.”

In the meantime, Yume had completely wrapped her arms around mine. Higashira couldn’t really see from where she was sitting, but she was getting closer and closer, to the point where it would be impossible to play it off as a joke if Higashira noticed. Even so, Yume was being careful to keep her breasts from touching my arm. *I’m thankful for her ability to do that, at least. A sweet aroma wafted in the air. Is this her usual shampoo, or is she wearing perfume?*

Her giggling sounded closer than before. I glanced to the side and saw her looking at me, as if she were trying to send a signal. *What are you playing at?* Ultimately, I decided to redouble my efforts to ignore her.

Yume Irido

I could hardly contain my laughter. My plan was working! He claimed he’d gotten better at hiding his reactions, but upon close observation it was obvious that I was bothering him, in a sense. His eye movements and stiff expression

told the whole story.

Overall, I'd say that joining them on their excursion was the correct choice. I'd been unsuccessful in seducing him the other night, and being alone with him would've definitely been awkward. Having Higashira-san as a buffer really smoothed things over. All I had to do was copy her unrestrained actions as a pretense to get closer to Mizuto.

I'll admit that I felt a little bad using Higashira-san like this, but then again, she'd been the one to invite me, and she was having a good time herself. Overall, it was a win-win.

"So, what kind of movie are we watching today? Anime, right?" I asked.

"It has elements of both sci-fi and coming-of-age stories. It's received great acclaim so far!"

I began engaging in idle chatter while lightly pressing into Mizuto, teasing him. I'd feel bad for Higashira-san if I took it any further than just casual flirting, but I enjoyed watching him squirm.

If it were just the two of us, he wouldn't be so reserved with his words. He was clearly holding himself back because Higashira-san was here. *What should I do next?* Just as I thought that, the bus turned around a corner, flinging my body to the side. As a result, my chest, which I'd been very careful to keep away from him, squished against his arm.

W-Wait! I didn't mean to go this far! Even after the bus straightened out again, I couldn't bring myself to immediately pull away. Something told me that if I did, it'd mean I lost. I glanced at Mizuto.

"I've viewed other films this director was involved in. They're very unique, and I believe you'll enjoy them as well, Mizuto-kun!"

"I'm not too familiar with anime directors, so I appreciate you looking out for me," he replied, completely unfazed.

Now I really feel like I lost. I stayed pressed against him until we arrived at our stop.

Mizuto Irido

How was I already so drained just from riding a bus?

“There’s a Toranoana over there and a Melon Books across from it,” Higashira pointed out.

“Sure are a lot of otaku shops around here,” Yume remarked.

“Farther down, there’s an arcade popular with the more hardcore crowd,” Higashira continued.

“Do you like games, Higashira-san?”

“I’ve been under the tutelage of my mother since birth. Our house motto is, ‘Those who pussy out and drop *Sekiro* should drop dead.’”

“Uh-huh. I see...” Yume obviously had no clue what she was talking about.

I walked behind the two of them, silently fuming, as we continued through the shopping district. She was toying with me. Last time I expressed concern at her acting out, she got mad at me. *What the hell kind of double standard is this?!*

When we got to the movie theater, Higashira went to get the tickets she’d reserved from the kiosk. They had a special rate for high schoolers, which made the price of a ticket about the cost of one book. *Pretty economical.* After we paid her back, Yume spoke up.

“I’m going to stop by the bathroom real quick. Are you okay, Higashira-san?”

“Yes. I’ll remain here.”

There was still some time before seating started, so I sat down on a bench, with Higashira following suit not too long after. A decent number of people were here either just looking at their phones or chatting. But we just sat there awkwardly. A silence fell.

Higashira restlessly swayed side to side while staring at the trailers playing on the TV. She seemed bored. I’d assumed that she was pretty used to being in a movie theater based on how smoothly she’d gotten the tickets.

Suddenly, she tilted her body forward and looked up at me. “Say, Mizuto-kun...”

“Yeah?”

“Are you perhaps in a sour mood?”

“Huh?” This caught me completely off guard. I found myself narrowing my eyes before I even knew it, which only served to make Higashira even more frantic.

“U-Uh, w-well, your expression seemed quite rigid on the bus. I apologize if this has all been in my head.”

On the bus, huh? I see. She was misinterpreting my effort to remain expressionless in the face of Yume’s teasing as me being in a bad mood. I didn’t realize I’d looked pissed. *Sorry, Higashira.*

“Don’t worry—I’m fine. I don’t ride buses often, so I felt a little motion sick. That’s all.”

I tried to keep my response gentle and my excuse believable so as to allay her fear, but she still seemed slightly worried.

“Oh, is that so? I’m relieved to hear that. My experience with friendly outings is minimal, so I was worried you were bored.”

Every so often, Higashira would look at me like this. While she normally marched to the beat of her own drum, ignoring her surroundings, she’d sometimes regain her presence of mind. She’d shrink uncomfortably and cautiously peer up at the person she was with. This happened maybe once every three days.

Thinking back, she’d *always* been like this. Even when we first met in the library, she acted like her existence itself was a sin. She was obviously extremely nervous whenever I would talk to her, but she did her best to respond. Ever since I’d realized this, I’d always done my best to be clear with her and leave no room for misinterpretation.

“Don’t worry.” I’d never been bored. Not once. “No matter how situationally unaware you are, I’ll never get mad at you.”

“Are you certain? You seem quite irate...”

“I’m not mad. I’m scolding you.” Higashira groaned and slumped her

shoulders. “Seriously, don’t worry. I remember my promise.” *I’ll always be the same Mizuto Irido that you’ve come to know.*

Higashira sheepishly played with her bangs as her facial expression loosened. “Ehe heh heh.”

“Why are you laughing?”

“I will be a Mizuto stan forever.”

“Am I an idol in your mind now?”

Yume Irido

I stared at Higashira-san and Mizuto as they sat on the bench. His expression was so natural, so *soft* when he spoke with her. It was a face he made only for her. I was jealous, and I wouldn’t deny it, but at the same time, I was genuinely happy.

Higashira-san was able to do what the two of us weren’t. She could prioritize the simple feeling of wanting to be with the person you like without being bogged down by pride or jealousy. I really respected her for that.

But did I really? Was that all there was to my happiness and relief? Had I felt so calm after seeing Higashira-san laughing because I knew who she really was on the inside?

She would smile at his compliments and sheepishly gush over him. Despite being neither a normal girl nor a whimsical happy-go-lucky girl, there was a side of her she’d never show Mizuto. But I knew that side.

Maybe I was worried for nothing. Higashira-san looked so comfortable with him. She had no reason to hide that part of her—to not be herself.

“Hey, is that...?”

“Wow, it certainly is!”

Hm? I turned around to look at the voices I thought I heard, but the theater was so packed, I couldn’t really see their source.

Mizuto Irido

“So, you were going to reserve the loveseats?” Yume asked Higashira.

“Yes. Initially, I was under the impression it would be cheaper that way. However, after some research, I discovered it was more economical to reserve two separate seats instead and apply the high schooler discount.”

“Those seats are always on the sides of the theater,” I added. “Makes it really hard to see the movie.”

“It *does* provide better opportunities for shenanigans, though. I assume that’s the reasoning behind their placement.”

“If that’s your goal when seeing a movie, just Netflix and chill,” I said with a smirk.

“I don’t think you two will ever understand the greatness of a movie date...” Yume sighed as we searched the dark theater for our seats.

Higashira ended up getting us some pretty good seats; we were pretty much right in the middle of the theater, not too far nor too close. The only complaint I had was that I once again found myself smack dab in between the two of them.

“You,” I hissed at Yume as she put her belongings in the basket under the chair.

“What?” she asked, looking up at me.

“Hands to yourself during the movie.”

“Hmph. Why don’t you just ignore it? You’re so good at that, right?”

“I’m gonna make you pay for my ticket if you do anything.”

“F-Fine! I get it, okay? Relax!” Apparently, my face was starting to scare her.

Either way, I’d accomplished my goal. I leaned back in my seat, now completely relaxed as I watched the trailers begin to play. I enjoyed watching them more than I’d anticipated. They really stimulated the imagination—or at least, I had fun reading between the lines. Well, I rarely ever wanted to watch the actual movie they were advertising. Maybe that’s why I wasn’t exactly used to how loud a movie theater was. Even the trailers boomed in my ear.

Hm? I felt someone’s gaze on me, but it wasn’t Yume’s. Higashira was staring at me.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“N-No...” she quickly looked away.

Is there something on my face? I felt my face, but didn’t really feel anything out of the ordinary. I wondered why she was looking at me, but before I could ask her, the theater began playing the video asking the audience to not talk during the movie. I turned off my phone and looked back at the screen. A guy with a camera for a head got arrested for pirating a movie. After it finished playing, the screen went dark and the movie started.

The screen was flooded with vivid colors and fluid animation, something you could never get from reading. There wasn’t really much I could say about it besides that it looked visually stunning. It was one thing for a book to have vivid descriptions and another to see it with your own eyes.

As I was admiring the visuals, I felt a hand on top of mine. Then, I heard Higashira gasp before the hand quickly retreated. Hands accidentally touching in a movie theater wasn’t anything new. It was kinda strange that the same person who’d nonchalantly rest her head on my lap was freaking out from our hands touching, though. I glanced over to her out of curiosity.

“Apologies...” Higashira whispered, shrinking her shoulders.

“No problem.” I tilted my head in confusion before returning to looking at the screen.

Is it just me, or is her face red? No way...right? Higashira was no Ayai.

Yume Irido

“That was pretty good,” Mizuto said.

“It was, wasn’t it? Especially the latter half,” Higashira-san agreed.

“I thought it was kind of hard to follow. Would this be considered ‘abstract,’ maybe?” I asked.

“Yeah, sure. Only an anime movie could make you feel like this,” Mizuto said.

We exchanged our impressions while walking out of the theater. I had a pretty good time. Maybe it was just because I didn’t watch anime that much, but I thought there were a lot of confusing parts. Well, that actually made it all

the more interesting to me. Higashira-san and Mizuto certainly seemed to like that aspect of the movie. They kept going back and forth about their interpretations.

“What’s next?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“I suppose we go our separate ways.”

“That feels like such a waste. It’s still early in the day. How about we grab something to eat?” I suggested.

“R-Really? I-Is that all right?” Higashira-san asked excitedly.

“Of course. Why wouldn’t it be? Just make sure to call home, okay?” I said.

“Yes, of course!” she said, whipping out her phone.

“I’m gonna go to the bathroom, then,” Mizuto said.

“Okay. What about you, Higashira-san?”

“I’m okay!”

After he left, Higashira-san stared at her phone screen.

“Is there something wrong, Higashira-san?”

“Oh, yes. It’s just that... A thought crossed my mind when I looked at Mizuto-kun in the theater.” She was wearing a soft smile. “It was...like a date.”

I felt myself wince in pain. *This innocence...* It was as painful to me as sunlight was to a vampire. There was a stark difference between Higashira-san, who was flustered by something so pure, and I, who was straight up trying to seduce him. I began lamenting the innocence that I’d lost when Higashira-san gasped.

“Perchance, when you said ‘good luck’ during our message exchanges, were you referring to this being a date?!”

“You *just* got that?”

“A-Ah... I... My apologies! I’m so very sorry!”

“N-No worries. It’s not like I explained my intentions.” I felt a tinge of guilt for using a girl this innocent for my own selfish purposes.

I felt myself getting more and more depressed, but Higashira-san was practically beaming. “When he rejected me, I thought I’d never be able to go on a date with him, but...surprisingly, that wasn’t true.”

“Yeah... Makes you wonder what it really means to date someone.”

Was it to stop other girls from having the ability to do so? If so, then I couldn’t believe how shallow dating was.

“I suppose the difference is that a couple could visit a hotel after their movie experience,” Higashira said seriously.

“Higashira-san... That’s minus one point for vulgarity.”

“Huh? Points? What happens if I continue to lose points?”

Higashira-san might not have been wrong, actually. Maybe there wasn’t any need for me to actually become his girlfriend. At the very least, that thought crossed my mind.

Mizuto Irido

“Party of three?” the hostess of the family restaurant asked. We nodded, and she showed us to our booth. “Let me know when you’re ready to order.”

“Okay,” Yume replied.

I picked up the menu. “What’re you two thinking?”

“It might be nice to get at least one thing we can all share,” Yume suggested.

“Pizza or fries then, I guess.”

“Hm, pizza...” Yume said pensively.

“What? Don’t like pizza?”

“No, I do, but...”

“Ah, finally counting calories? I knew it was only a matter of time.”

“N-No! Fat goes to my boobs anyway...”

“You’re nearing the end of that golden time when you can write off weight gain as part of a growth spurt.”

“Oh, shut up, you stick insect! Do you not have a tactful bone in your body?!”

Higashira seemed restless as Yume and I bickered about what to order.

“Something wrong, Higashira?” I asked.

“N-No, it’s just that...” She swayed nervously. “This is my first time having dinner with friends in a restaurant. I’m...a tad emotional.”

“I totally get that! Eating out with your family feels completely different than eating out with your friends,” Yume excitedly agreed.

“Precisely! And it possesses a different quality compared to stopping by somewhere after school ends.”

It was nice to see the two loners coming alive by talking about their shared experience. In the end, we decided to get fries for the table. I ordered a pilaf, Yume got pasta, and Higashira got hamburger steak. It went without saying that we all added the drink bar to our order.

“Higashira-san... Are you a real-life example of everything you eat going to your chest?” Yume asked as Higashira began filling her cup with Coke.

“Perhaps? The last time I weighed myself was during the school physical.”

“You don’t weigh yourself regularly?!”

“Even if I do, the numbers never really stay in my head.”

“Maybe instead of jumping to teaching you how to dress, we should’ve started with the basics for girls...”

Sounds nice. Would’ve saved me a lot of trouble.

“Truth be told, today was the first time I’ve gone to a movie theater with anyone else. I must say, it was quite enjoyable to have others to discuss the movie with immediately after it concluded,” Higashira mused nonchalantly as she munched on the fries.

“I guess I shouldn’t be too surprised that you’re okay with going to the theater solo...” Yume weakly laughed.

“Is watching a film by oneself not the standard practice?”

“Yeah, it’s normal.”

“Well... I guess it’s not too rare nowadays,” Yume agreed reluctantly.

Watching a movie with anyone else meant that you had to find a time that worked for everyone. Planning all that sounded like a pain in the ass. If anybody else but Higashira had invited me, I would've flat-out refused.

"We should watch another movie sometime!" Higashira said excitedly.

"I don't really have my finger on the pulse of what's popular, but are there any other must-see movies?" Yume asked.

"I'm only aware of anime movies. Summer vacation is coming to a close as well, so it's possible that there might not be many new releases."

"Then let's see a live-action movie next time. Nothin' wrong with that, right?" I suggested.

"Sure! I'm interested in anything besides romantic movies," Higashira said.

"Why not?" Yume asked.

"They upset me for some reason."

"I get that," I agreed.

"You do?" Yume asked.

I pulled out my phone and turned it on so I could see if anything interesting was coming out soon. When I unlocked it, Higashira's eyes widened as she saw my wallpaper.

"Oh, you use the default wallpaper, Mizuto-kun?"

"Eyes to yourself."

"Allow me to use your phone for a moment," she said, swiping it from my hands.

"H-Hey!"

In the next moment, she went to the camera. At first, I wasn't sure what she was doing, but then she switched the camera to the front-facing one and squeezed herself next to me.

Yume looked incredibly flustered. "W-Wai—"

"Say cheese!"

Suddenly, I had a picture of the two of us on my phone.

“Here you go,” she said, giving it back to me.

“What was that for?”

“You can use that as your wallpaper.”

“Why would I? You’re not my girlfriend.”

In the picture, Higashira was holding up a peace sign with her usual expressionless face while I gave the camera a dubious look. The picture was fairly innocuous, but the fact that it was just the two of us made it feel like we were dating. I wasn’t about to use this as my wallpaper.

“Hmph. In that case...” Higashira snatched my phone away from me again, moved to the other side, and squeezed herself next to Yume.

“W-Wai—”

“Cheese!” After taking the picture, she moved back to my side and gave me my phone back. “How about this?”

“I...have no words.”

“It’s like you’re a dad,” Yume said.

“Sugar daddy?!” Higashira exclaimed.

“No!” Yume and I immediately shouted, shutting her down before she got too out of hand.

“That’s another point gone,” Yume said.

“Point”? What?

“Hm...” Higashira concentrated on the picture. “How about...” she nervously looked at me. “Could we take a picture of...the three of us?”

Yume and I tilted our heads and looked at Higashira.

She frantically waved her hands. “W-Well, u-um, I was thinking about how this was the first time that the three of us have gone out together. We certainly hang out in your domicile, however, perhaps as a commemoration of today... Uh...”

Yume and I naturally looked at each other at the word “commemoration.” We weren’t trying to send each other silent signals about the secret we were keeping from Higashira—we were both surprised but united in our response.

There was no doubt that Yume and I both had a certain haze in our hearts stemming from today, August 27th. There were a lot of complicated emotions surrounding this date, but we were doing our best to not show any of them in front of Higashira.

Neither of us could deny that we had some conflicting feelings about spending this particular day with Higashira. Last year was our anniversary. The year before that was the start of everything. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if today was the start of something *new* that we commemorated. We might be able to overwrite the memories from our youth.

Higashira looked at us worriedly. “I-Is that a no?”

“Of course not,” I said emphatically. “Why are you acting so reserved now? Where’d your boldness when you forcefully took selfies with both of us go?”

“Exactly,” Yume agreed. “Let’s take a selfie of the three of us as a commemoration of today.”

We moved to one side of the table and took a picture with me in the middle again. Then it hit me: I messed up two years ago. I messed up last year. But maybe not this year. As long as I had this picture, I would be able to have hope that I’d done things right.



“Doesn’t this picture feel like the kind where one of us will perish?”

“Pfft.”

“Higashira-san!”

“Huh? But, this looks exactly like the kind of photos that families who’ve lost their child share.”

“Yeah, the kind they keep in lockets.”

“Yes! Precisely!”

“I get it, but I’m not looking to get cursed!” Yume said.

After our food came, we talked about stories in which the only thing left of the deceased was their picture in a locket.

Yume Irido

“I had a spectacular time today!”

“Me too.”

“Please contact me if there are any other interesting movies you wish to see!”

“Of course! See you later!”

Higashira happily waved before disappearing into her apartment building. We’d completely lost track of time after chatting away the evening. We felt bad making Higashira-san walk all the way back by herself, so we’d walked her home.

After making sure that she’d gotten in okay, the two of us turned around and left. The streets were illuminated by the faint light of the surrounding buildings as well as the lights from cars passing by. We walked side by side in silence for a while until...

“You’re done clinging to me?” Mizuto asked, shooting me a look.

I jumped. “I-I changed my mind.”

“Uh-huh...” he replied, uninterested, looking straight ahead.

Trying to cozy up to him after Higashira-san was gone didn't sit right with me. It made me feel like I was being sneaky. Sure, my initial plan had been to use Higashira-san today to further my own plans—but that was when I wanted to keep today special for me and *Irido-kun*. Things were different now. Today was the first time that Higashira-san, Mizuto, and I went out together. I didn't need to do anything extra. I was satisfied with the movie being good.

"Hey," I called out to him, without looking at him.

"What?" Mizuto responded without looking at me.

"I'll be mad if you ever make Higashira-san cry."

"That'll never happen, so long as you don't do anything *extra*."

"I can't guarantee that."

"Seriously?" Mizuto turned to me.

My shoulders began shaking with laughter. Maybe I couldn't be as single-minded about him as I used to be, but even so, that didn't mean that our bond was lost. It felt like Higashira-san had taught me that. That's why I wanted Higashira-san and Mizuto to be on good terms—to be together forever.

Mizuto's phone rang all of a sudden. "Hm? Kawanami?" Mizuto pulled it out and answered. "Yeah?"

At almost the same exact time, I got a LINE notification from Akatsuki-san.

Akatsuki☆: Yume-chan, did something happen?

Akatsuki☆: People at school seem to think that Irido-kun and Higashira-san are dating.

The Only You in the World

Isana Higashira

For as long as I can remember, I've been perceived as a strange girl. I received strange looks in kindergarten when I drew the logo of the movers rather than a portrait of my mother. I was labeled as strange by my peers in elementary school when they learned that I'd used a full sheet of paper to write: "Upon much self reflection, there is no particular profession I'd like to join at this point in time" as a response to our essay prompt regarding what we wished to be as an adult. Regardless of the assignment, everyone seemed to be able to match one another either through direct observation or intuition. Was that what we were supposed to do?

In kindergarten, we'd been instructed to draw what we liked. In elementary school, we'd been told to give an honest answer as to what our ideal profession would be. We'd never been instructed to write answers to match everyone else's. How did the others know to do that without those explicit words? It remains as confusing as it was back then.

I still remember the words my mother told me. "You're weird? Good for you! Listen, Isana, you're the only you in the world. Of course you're not like other people."

"Then why do the others call me strange?" I'd inquired.

"That's 'cuz they're all scared of layin' themselves bare. Duh."

My mother was a fearless woman. She didn't understand. I was just as afraid as the rest. Exposing your true self, leaving nothing to the imagination, was tantamount to leaving yourself vulnerable—open to people tearing you down piece by piece. I was no exception to being frightened of that possibility. My problem was that I was incapable of hiding my true self, of protecting myself.

Yes, I was simply incapable of all this.

Yume Irido

“Hey, you!”

“Hey! Wow, you’re so tan!”

“You finish your homework?”

“Just barely. I thought I was gonna die!”

The classroom somehow felt new after summer break. While my classmates chatted among themselves, I looked around the classroom that felt simultaneously familiar and new. I’d been in contact with friends through LINE, but seeing them in person was completely different.

“Hey, Irido-san!”

“Hi, Irido-chan!”

“You two are acting as if we haven’t seen each other in a while, but didn’t we just hang out a week or so ago?” I asked Maki-san and Nasuka-san.

I put my bag on my chair as I talked with my usual group of friends. They were just as I remembered them. Maki Sakamizu, who was in the basketball club, was still tall with short hair, and Nasuka Kanai, who was in the karuta club, still had the same bob cut and sleepy look on her face.

I moved my bag, which wasn’t too heavy since all we had today was the commencement ceremony, to my desk. Maki-san proceeded to nab the seat in front of me while Nasuka-san gently took the one to my side. Then, I saw a familiar ponytail pop up.

“Heya, Yume-chan! I missed you so much!” Akatsuki-san practically jumped on me.

“What do you mean? You *just* saw me yesterday.”

“Yeah, but it’s been a while since I’ve seen you in your school uniform.”

“Am I a different person in my uniform?”

“What, like an alt character in a game?” Maki-san asked, heartily laughing.

For the time being, I peeled Akatsuki-san off of me. It was September, but it

was still as hot as it had been over the summer. Her body heat really wasn't helping.

"Can't believe summer break's over," Maki-san said, wistful, as she surveyed the classroom. "Not sure how to explain it, but this summer wasn't very summery. Like, where was the thrill? I mean, I had a training camp and a basketball tournament, but no one's changed all that much."

"Yeah, I pretty much spent all day lazing around home," Akatsuki-san agreed. "I helped the athletics clubs out a few times, but, god, homework was such a struggle."

"Exactly! There wasn't any time to do teenager stuff!"

Akatsuki-san had completely skipped over the fact that she'd gone to the pool with Kawanami-kun. Scary how she could so brazenly lie without even batting an eye.

"What about you, Nasucchi? Anything happen over summer break?" Maki-san asked, turning to Nasuka-san.

The expression on her face as Maki-san fished for information kind of reminded me of Higashira-san's.

"Me? I only really had the karuta tournament that my club participated in."

"Oh, what? So, same as us."

"I guess the only other thing would be that I got a boyfriend."

"A...what?" Maki-san froze.

"Huh?!" Akatsuki-san and I practically screamed.

Meanwhile, Nasuka-san looked puzzled by our reactions.

"Wh-What? A b-boy... Sorry, *what* did you say?"

"Oh, that I participated in a karuta tournament."

"Not *that* part!" Maki-san exclaimed.

"Don't act so cliché! Obviously, we want to know about the *boyfriend* part!" Akatsuki-san cried.

Nasuka-san calmly tilted her head in confusion. “You mean when I said I got a boyfriend?”

“Yeah!”

“Did you really get one?!”

“I did.” Nasuka-san nodded.

We all stared at her in wonder. Never had we thought that Nasuka-san, who was low energy, incredibly troublesome, and uninterested in romance—as well as being the female version of Hotaro Oreki from *Hyouka*—would get a boyfriend.

“Who is he?!” Maki-san was the first to snap out of the daze. “Who are you dating?! Is it someone in our class?!”

“No, he’s an upperclassman in our club.”

“Did he ask you out?!”

“No, I asked him.”

“What?!” the three of us practically screamed.

She confessed to him?! She’s in love?! Behind that sleepy face of hers lay that of a maiden in love?!

Nasuka-san seemed completely unfazed as she continued. “So, basically, I said, ‘I can tell you have a thing for me, so why don’t we stop beating around the bush and go out?’”

“Does that count as a confession?” Maki-san asked.

“It’s definitely not what I expected,” Akatsuki-san said.

“But it is really on-brand for her,” I added.

“Can you blame me, though? It’s just a waste of time, stretching things out.”

Ugh. Her words cut me like a sharp blade. *Everyone has their own circumstances, you know...*

“This is the first time I’ve heard you having romantic feelings for anyone, Nasucchi.”

“Do you think I’m incapable of love or something?”

“Well, it’s more like I have this image of you turning people down because you think a relationship would be too much work.”

“Totally get that!” Akatsuki-san agreed.

“Well, he’s different.”

“Oh?” My ears perked up at these words.

“He buys me ice cream on the way home.”

“That’s *it*?!”

Any excitement I’d felt completely disappeared. *What a cheap way to win someone’s heart.* I’d always considered Higashira-san a weirdo, but Nasuka-san was really out there herself. Still, the romantic sense of her circumstances weren’t completely lost on me. Unbeknownst to me, she’d been going home with him every day and being treated to ice cream while he fumbled over his words to try and make her even a little bit interested in him. Then finally, she looked his way. Talk about heart-throbbing!

But Nasuka-san seemed done talking about herself and turned her attention to me. “Speaking of romantic developments, though, shouldn’t we be talking about your brother?”

“Oh, right! I’ve heard the rumors,” Maki-san agreed.

My heart stopped. I glanced over at him. Since we’d had a seat change before summer break, we weren’t sitting near each other anymore. Now he was in the middle of the row closest to the door, with plenty of classmates swarming him with questions and Kawanami-kun doing his best to protect him.

“That rumor’s spread like wildfire. Is it true that he’s going steady with a girl from class three?” Nasuka-san asked.

“Well...” I averted my eyes. I had no clue what the best course of action here was, so I looked to Akatsuki-san for help.

“Might as well be honest,” she said with a chuckle.

“Oh? You know the deets, Akki?” Maki-san asked.

“Yep. We’ve hung out a few times. Also, I’m pretty sure I’ve talked about her before—y’know, Higashira-san?”

“Higashira... Oh, riiight. That girl,” Nasuka-san said.

Thinking back, Nasuka-san had even seen the two of them walking home together once around the beginning of their friendship. Given that, I was surprised by how little she was reacting, but I guess Maki-san made up for that.

“He’s like the poster child for ‘no interest in romance,’ though! Apparently, that’s kinda what made him popular after the midway point of last semester until now. So the fact that he has a girlfriend is *huge*!”

“There were already whispers of their relationship during the study camp. People kept wondering what the deal was with him and the girl who was with him all the time.”

“Yeah, but they weren’t really making headlines back then. It was nothing compared to the rumors surrounding him and Irido-san.”

I averted my eyes again. I’d gotten my just deserts for that rumor. I’d never had the chance to set the record straight.

“But everything’s different now that they’ve been spotted on a date. That girl...Higashira-san? Apparently, she’s got a completely different vibe in school. I hear she’s super cute!” Maki-san said.

Akatsuki-san sarcastically laughed. We were the ones who’d taught her how to have said vibe.

“So?” Nasuka-san continued. “Are they dating?”

“Well...” Akatsuki-san was right. Being honest was best. Lying could just make things worse. “I don’t *think* they’re dating...”

“Huh? So it’s not true?”

“That’s just how rumors go,” Nasuka-san stated plainly.

“Wait, so does that mean the rumor of her having huge boobs—bigger than a gravure idol’s—isn’t—”

“It’s true,” both Akatsuki-san and I said flatly.

“Whew. Seriously? This I gotta see.”

“We could introduce you. I bet she’d get along well with Nasuka-chan, don’tcha think, Yume-chan?”

“True... They’ve got similar vibes.”

“What about me?” Maki-san asked.

“We might have you hang back. Y’know, on the account of the whole ‘delinquent’ thing.”

“Who’re you callin’ a delinquent?!”

As we all laughed, I began to worry—not about Higashira-san being accepted as Mizuto’s girlfriend, but about how the environment around her might change and how that might affect her.

Isana Higashira

As soon as I opened the door to the classroom, I was shocked. Prior to summer vacation, no one took notice of me whatsoever—I’d been practically invisible. So why was it that, immediately upon entering the classroom, I felt numerous gazes upon me?

Yume-san had informed me of the rumor surrounding myself and Mizuto-kun. I’d already had a faint notion that Mizuto-kun was more popular than he’d seemed. To actually discover that he truly *was*, however, caught me off guard. Although, to be fair, I had been the first to set my eyes on him.

My shoulders shrank as I waded through the stares of my classmates and lowered myself into my seat. I exhaled, envisioning I might be able to calm my nerves in the comfort of my familiar desk, but unfortunately, that was not the case. I was wholly unused to others perceiving me in such a strong manner. I was receiving a small taste of what it had been like when Yume-san had experienced her boom of popularity at the beginning of school. I had great respect for her ability to maintain her composure through all that.

“Hey, Higashira-san?”

In the middle of deciding whether to read a book or sleep until class

commenced, I heard someone nervously call out. I wondered who they were talking to... *Wait. Were my ears mistaken, or did she say my name?*

“O-Oh, m-me?”

“Yep. You.”

Two girls had approached me. I recognized them as my classmates, however, I could not for the life of me recall their names. *My deepest apologies!* I figured Mizuto-kun hadn’t any idea what his classmates’ names were either. Perhaps I had nothing to apologize for.

On the other hand, the two of them seemed to be under the impression that I did, in fact, know their names. That would explain why they weren’t introducing themselves, at least. Did they believe that, since we were already in the second semester, I’d have a grasp on the identities of everyone in this class?

“So there’s this rumor going around...”

“Did you really go on a date with Irido-kun from class seven?”

“A...date?”

I’d been informed by Yume-san and Minami-san that Mizuto-kun and I had been seen together. From their information, should I have inferred that our outing had been interpreted as a date by those who had observed us? To be sure, I needed to continue the conversation and confirm.

“Um... Is this regarding the 27th of last month?”

“Yeah!”

“So it really was a date!”

Uh, um, I’ve yet to answer you. I simply wished to confirm the date in question. I attempted to correct their false assumptions, however, I was too late. Their words spread like wildfire to the girls in the class, who suddenly began clamoring around as if they’d been eavesdropping and waiting for the right time.

“When did you two start dating?!”

“You two were together a lot during the study camp, right?”

“Why’d you keep this to yourself?!”

“What’s Irido-kun really like?”

“Don’t be a stranger!”

“Awawawawawa!” I was feeling so frantic from the barrage of comments and questions that I’d unintentionally begun making Yoshi sounds. I was unable to mentally process everything being said almost simultaneously. Why were they all suddenly acting friendly with me? I had no opportunity to respond to their inquiries. More pressingly, they were convinced that Mizuto-kun and I were in a relationship. Also, why were they all suddenly acting friendly with me?!

I was growing uneasy. We were *not* in a relationship. How could we be, when he’d rejected me? Though they’d come up with this misunderstanding on their own, it didn’t quite sit well with me to stay silent and allow them to remain deceived. I needed to shut them down—with haste.

“U-Um—” I began before being promptly interrupted.

“How much did you two hang out over summer break?!”

“Huh? W-Well, practically daily.”

“Daily?!”

“Sheesh, you two are so in love!”

“W-Well, perhaps not *daily*. When Mizuto-kun went to his grandparent’s home, we—”

“You call him by his first name?!”

“Where do you two usually go on dates? Any usual spots?”

“O-Oh, well, I usually go to his home, but—”

“His *house*?! Every day?!”

“You two are basically married!”

The surrounding girls squealed excitedly. *Wh-What should I do? I reflexively answered their questions and as a result lost the chance to deny that Mizuto-kun and I are in a relationship.* I would have been lying, though, if I claimed I wasn’t feeling slightly elated by the current situation. *Hm... “Basically married.”*

That's how people perceive us?

"So, who confessed to who?!"

"W-Well, I suppose I confessed..." *And got rejected.*

"What did you say?!"

"U-Uh, well..."

"Aw, you're blushing. So cute!"

I sheepishly giggled. I couldn't recall the last time I had conversed this much with my classmates. In fact, this might have very well been the first time. Though Mizuto-kun and I may not have been dating, I'd yet to tell a single lie. I could indulge in this situation a little longer...couldn't I? I could be his pretend girlfriend for just a little longer, right?

We were dismissed as soon as the commencement ceremony concluded. Immediately, I set my course for the library as usual. Perhaps it was my imagination, but I was almost certain that I could feel the gazes of others on me as I walked through the halls. I simultaneously felt a sense of superiority and loneliness.

As an aside, I was genuinely surprised that answering everyone's questions honestly did not contradict their belief that we were in a relationship. Yume-san was constantly informing me that the actions between myself and Mizuto-kun were exactly the same as those in a relationship. I supposed her concerns were valid. Who would've thought?

I'd no desire to bring this commotion to the library for fear of disturbing others, so I slowly and cautiously made my way there, doing my best to elude detection. *So this is what celebrities feel like.* I surveyed the area to confirm whether any gazes were on me before entering. As I began to approach our usual spot, it suddenly struck me that there was no guarantee Mizuto-kun would be present.

I'd come here out of habit based on our first semester traditions, but perhaps after summer break, Mizuto-kun would not be so inclined to come. I nervously peeked around the bookcase and saw him leaning against the air-conditioning

unit below the windowsill.

A strange laugh escaped me. I was overjoyed that everything was the same as it had been in our first semester. Mizuto-kun and I would be able to see each other every day in the second semester as well. Moreover, this meant that he had every intent of staying true to his promise...right?

"Hm? Hey." Mizuto-kun looked up from his book.

"Greetings. Long time no see...or not."

"It's hard to branch out of customary greetings."

"What are you reading?" I placed my bag down, removed my socks, and seated myself on top of the air conditioner.

The familiarity was very comforting. Sitting next to Mizuto-kun in the desolate corner of the mostly deserted library, sockless, almost reminded me of being in my room. Perhaps that was why I felt so comfortable.

As enjoyable as it was to have my classmates fawn over me, this was much more my speed. If I was stranded on a deserted island and was only afforded the luxury of one personal effect, I'd bring Mizuto-kun.

Suddenly, I heard some feminine whispers.

"I-Is that..."

"The rumor's true."

I looked around and saw two girls glancing at us from the reading area. *Oh? Mizuto-kun has fans here as well?* When he looked up at them, they immediately averted their gazes. Mizuto-kun slightly furrowed his brow.

"Are you bothered?" I asked.

I had a suspicion that he did not enjoy being the center of attention. It should've been fairly obvious he preferred being in the background, meaning that he was not a fan of the current situation.

"Are *you*?" he asked, answering with a question of his own.

"I suppose. I must admit I feel slightly bigheaded from being fawned over."

"Stop that." He lightly tapped me on my head.

“Ow.”

This was a very normal interaction between us, but the two girls from before squealed in excitement.

Mizuto-kun quickly reset his hand's position and fiddled with his hair as if that had been his original intention. “So, what did you say?” he asked with a sigh.

“Hm?”

“To your classmates. They questioned you, didn't they?”

“Well...” I certainly couldn't inform him that when I said I'd been bigheaded it wasn't in jest. “I don't believe I said anything that wasn't based in fact...”

“The way you phrased that is suspicious, but it's probably fine. For the record, I've declined to comment when asked.”

“Is there a reason it wouldn't be okay?”

“What happens if I open my mouth and tell people we aren't dating when you tell others that we are?”

“What indeed?”

“They'll think you're some crazy stalker chick.”

“Oh! That's true!”

“Did this really never cross your mind?”

No, it hadn't. I couldn't even imagine what would've occurred if I'd gotten too ahead of myself and began bragging. “Wouldn't it be best if we rehearsed our answers, then?”

“Yeah. We shouldn't vehemently deny anything, since that'll have the opposite effect. It'll be safer if we give noncommittal answers, obfuscating the situation.”

“Understood! I will obfuscate to the best of my abilities!”

“You worry me... Ugh, this is *such* a pain in the ass.” Mizuto-kun exhaled before continuing. “God, don't any of them have better things to do with their lives?”

Truthfully, I was slightly glad that my classmates were talking to me. I was much more attached to the world than Mizuto-kun was, so I felt joy when others paid me attention. That being said, I absolutely detested the idea of causing problems for Mizuto-kun.

Kogure Kawanami

“How’re things lookin’ on your end?” I asked Akatsuki as I began munching on a slice of pizza we’d gotten delivered for dinner.

She was currently sitting across from me, tapping at her phone with one hand and stretching a strand of cheese from her mouth to the slice in her other.

“It’s already spread to most of the first-year girls, but I don’t think any of them have bad intentions. Should be fine to let things be.”

“Seriously? You’re sure there’s not even one person who’s gonna be like, ‘That bitch is getting too full of herself’?”

“Yep. Even if there was someone like that, at most, it’d just be some person who wants to go against what everyone else is head over heels for. I guess he’s lucky that this happened before he got too popular. People can accept that they’re weirdos in love.”

“Those people might accept it, but I can’t.”

“How’re things with the guys?”

“Nobody really cares. There might be some guys who start going after Irido-san again now that the brother she was supposedly into is off the market.”

“Make sure you stop that in its tracks.”

“Already on it.” I was also on my phone.

“So, yeah, looks like we don’t have to put out any fires. Thought as much.”

“You did?”

“I told Irido that we’d try to do damage control, but he said not to do anything unnecessary.”

“‘Unnecessary’? Does he not care what people around him think?”

“No, but more than that...” I thought back to Irido’s words when I’d proposed the idea of helping out, and how he’d asked if I was looking down on Higashira.

“Whaddya think?” I asked.

Akatsuki furrowed her brow and tilted her head in thought. “Higashira-san is really girly in front of me and Yume-chan. She blushes nonstop when Irido-kun compliments her and gets really down when he’s mad at her. It’s almost like taking care of a kid.”

“Okay... And?”

“I don’t know if Irido-kun knows that.” *Is that concern I hear in this psycho’s voice?* “I’m not sure he understands that Higashira-san is a normal girl.”

Isana Higashira

“Hey, Higashira-san! Wanna eat lunch together?”

The next day, the new banner character, Isana Higashira, was still a hot item in the classroom gacha. This may have been the first time I’d ever been invited to lunch by my classmates. I rarely ever saw anyone other than Mizuto-kun, Yume-san, or Minami-san during lunch.

“U-Uh, i-if you don’t mind me joining...”

“Of course not! Come on, let’s go! Did you bring lunch, or are you buying it?”

“O-Oh, I-I brought mine.”

Thank you for making me lunch today, mother! Usually, she simply handed me some change through a yawn, but it seems that the god of sleep was smiling upon me today. With things going this well, something else *must* have been going on. However, the girls who’d invited me seemed genuinely kind...even if I still had no idea what their names were.

“You’re close enough with Irido-kun that you know his family, right? Do you know Irido-san—I mean, his older stepsister—too?”

“Oh, indeed. Irido-san occasionally invites me over as well.”

“Huh? Really?!”

“So jelly!”

The main topic discussed during our lunch break was, of course, Mizuto-kun. I was almost impressed that they had not exhausted their questions regarding him. They were extremely thorough, if nothing else. Part of me wondered if they were interested in Mizuto-kun, but from what I could gather, they seemed to just be curious.

I answered their inquiries to the best of my abilities while being careful to not say anything that would infringe on the privacy of Mizuto-kun and Yume-san. Fortunately, there were people who understood my plight and would come to my aid.

“That’s not something you can ask,” they’d say jokingly, rebuking their friends.

Seeing them like this made me believe they were truly good people. However...

“Seriously, though, how nice. Irido-kun looks like such a meek guy.”

“Yeah, I mean, I always thought he’d be useless in a fight.”

“Uh...pardon?” I asked.

“He saved you when you were surrounded by delinquents, right?”

“Oh em gee! That’s like right out of a shojo manga. So jelly!”

“Uh...pardon?” I repeated, still not following. *I have no recollection of mentioning Mizuto-kun rescuing me from delinquents.*

“He took your hand and ran away with you, right?”

“I heard he beat up all the delinquents.”

“No, no. He broke them with just his *words*.”

“I heard he carried her like a princess and ran off.”

O-Oh, my. What a disaster. The rumor has grown out of control!

Unbeknownst to me, Mizuto-kun had become Superman! Others truly saw him that way? They thought him to be a white knight?! Sure, I understood, but...

“U-Uh, a-about that—” I tried speaking up but was immediately interrupted.

“Irido-kun can cook too, right, Higashira-san?”

Everyone suddenly turned to me. *Ah...they're all looking at me expectantly.* They were obviously expecting more juicy tales that detailed the heroism and amazing exploits of Mizuto-kun. They had no need to explicitly ask me to do that; it was written all over their faces.

However, Mizuto-kun was nowhere near as perfect as they might've wished him to be. When I visited him in the afternoon, often he'd have just woken up. There was even a time when he'd neglected to fix his bedhead for three consecutive *days*. He was hardly even capable of doing push-ups! There was no way he could hit someone without his fist breaking. I needed to deny the rumors. I needed to deny—

“I believe...he's quite talented at cooking,” I replied.

“I knew it!”

“Ohmigod, he's home-oriented, smart, *and* manly?!”

“He's such a cutie too!”

“He is!”

“He's seriously cute!”

“I agree! He certainly has an adorable visage!” I chimed in.

None of this is untrue! He can cook and he is adorable. My lack of denial had absolutely nothing to do with me being frightened of ruining the mood! I truly had no intention of deceiving them...I promise.

Perhaps it was simply my imagination, but it seemed as though more people were in the library after school than yesterday. I was unsure, since I hadn't made a habit of counting the number of people present daily. Could the whispers of conversation I heard as Mizuto-kun and I read in our usual spot really have simply been a fabrication of my mind?

Their conversation may not have had anything to do with us, and they may not have had any ill intent. But it was a stark contrast to the silence we'd enjoyed prior to our summer vacation. They were whispering, for certain, but it still sounded particularly raucous—especially after I'd gotten so used to how

things had been.

I almost would have preferred if the librarian told them off for chatting in the library...but on second thought, they would've first scolded myself and Mizuto for all the conversations we'd had.

I wasn't the only one bothered by our surroundings, from what I could tell. Mizuto-kun seemed to be much more cautious of coming into contact with me than he used to be. Typically, he'd idly brush his fingers through my hair, touching my ears and such. However, he did no such thing today. I'd secretly looked forward to him doing that, so I felt rather unsatisfied.

I also felt as if his brow was furrowed more than usual, his expression more stiff. It was quite possible that the rumors weren't making him as elated as they made me. I wondered if this situation was stressing him out.

"Um, would you like to change locations?" I inquired.

"I'm all right. Don't worry about it," he replied with a smile.

He had said he was "all right" several times, but was he? I wasn't the most reliable person, so perhaps he was avoiding confiding in me. Even when I'd confessed to him, he hadn't revealed he had previously been in a relationship.

Since I'm very simpleminded and not the brightest, I was happy to remain his friend after failing to become his romantic partner. I'd never even stopped to consider that he was simply remaining friends with me in order to avoid leaving me heartbroken. I hadn't considered that he'd been showing me compassion to avoid inflicting psychological shock on me.

After my rejection, he accepted my selfish request to return to normalcy and interacted with me as if nothing had happened. It was strange that he hadn't uttered even a word of complaint despite this being behavior completely removed from common sense. Was he truly "all right"? Was I acting correctly?

"Just be yourself. Everything'll be all right."

He kept repeating those words—"all right." Maybe it would be. Maybe I could be as well...

"How can you suggest that when you've never once seen what I'm like in my

classroom?”

“Huh?” *Hm? What did I say?* “Higashira?” Mizuto-kun looked at me with concern.

“Is something the matter, Mizuto-kun?” I asked in my usual tone.

I must exercise more caution. I was close to once again failing to read the room.

No one event in particular had led to this. This was a result of foolish decision after foolish decision on a daily basis. I’d been labeled as a “strange girl,” and I had no recourse to revise this perception.

Take, for example, when two boys in my elementary school class quarreled with one another. I’m unable to recall what the exact cause had been, however, it most likely had to do with one of the boys bad-mouthing the other, resulting in a retaliatory strike.

They began grappling with each other, which forced our teacher to intervene and tear them apart. Through sobs, they explained the circumstances surrounding their altercation.

“Both of you are at fault,” our teacher had said. “Apologize to each other and go back to being friends, okay?”

Every time I think back on it, I have an irresistible urge to tilt my head in confusion. Why was it necessary for them to apologize? Sure, they were both at fault, but the person who initiated the physical altercation should’ve been the first to apologize. Moreover, they weren’t friends to begin with. In fact, they weren’t on any particular terms—good or bad. How were they supposed to “go back to being friends” when they were lacking that relationship in the first place? Was our teacher really cognizant of the situation? Was he even aware of who those two kids were?

Unfortunately, these questions hadn’t always been thoughts. I’d said all this aloud, back then. Yes, the person who was not even remotely involved in their quarrel had spoken up and harshly questioned our intervening teacher. My clearest memory came from what occurred next—the change in atmosphere in

our classroom.

Our teacher clammed up and had an uncomfortable look on his face. My classmates were looking at me, confused as to why I'd even opened my mouth to spew something so unnecessary. The two boys who'd been quarreling pursed their lips in embarrassment and turned bright red as they glared at me.

I could remember all of this clearly, along with the comments that'd been written on my report card for that semester. "Slightly lacking in cooperative ability." I was young, so I had to look up what that word meant, but when I figured it out, I felt shocked.

In other words, my teacher had claimed I was unable to work with others. How could that be? Our teacher constantly told all thirty-six of us in class to get along and work with each other. I didn't believe I'd been disobeying his instructions.

When I cried to my mother about this, she laughed so hard.

"He wants *all* thirty-six of you to get along and work together?! Ha ha ha! Like hell that's possible! What an idiot! Look at this, Isana—I have a hundred and twelve friends on my account, but y'know, if I mess up even a little, they'll mercilessly flame me like there's no tomorrow. These are my *game* buddies! They'll hurl all kinds of curses at me while giving me mats I ask for and help me if I'm struggling with an enemy. Why the hell do you need to 'get along' with people? Say what you want. Get into fights with people. The only ones who'll get their panties in a bunch are stupid-ass adults who can't even come to grips with the intentions of children. Ha ha ha!"

I truly looked up to my mother. I very much desired to become like her—to be so free and bold with my actions. That's why I readily accepted my mother's words over what had been written in my report card. I would speak as I wished. I would quarrel with others. I would live as my mother instructed me to. As a result, I did not have a single friend in elementary school. This trend continued into middle school, and finally, someone spelled it out for me.

"Higashira-san...can't you, like, read the room more?"

"Everyone's fed up with you 'cause of all the stuff you blurt out. Like, who asked?"

When I questioned what she'd meant by "everyone," I only upset her more.

"Shut up! I mean *everyone*! God, *this* is what I mean. You're so annoying!"

But who was "everyone"? What was this "room" I should've been reading? Had I said anything incorrect?

"Higashira, you're entitled to your own opinions, but you're not gonna get anywhere in society if you don't make some concessions."

"Do you think your attitude is doing you any favors?! Use common sense!"

What had they meant by "common sense" and "getting somewhere in society"? Why had they all been so upset with me? I couldn't understand. I had absolutely no clue. Nobody had instructed me on this. Why would they expect me to understand all this without any prior knowledge? Hadn't we been taught from a young age that diversity should be celebrated, not rebuked? Why was I garnering the ire of others for simply saying what others didn't? Why was I being told to conform to how others conducted themselves?

It was impossible for me. I was unable to proactively converse with others. To inquire whether others could lend me their textbook. To say anything if I dropped my eraser. To pair up with anyone in physical education. To write my thoughts regarding our social study field trips. To sing during choir. To finish the lunches provided at school. Things that were as simple as breathing for others were impossible for me.

Was I at fault? Could I truly be blamed? Was this something that could be overcome if only I put in the effort to do so? Was it simply a matter of effort for me to achieve "normalcy"? If so, then why did others not put in the effort to conform to who I was? Why was I being forced to act in a way that I didn't want to?

My entire life, I'd been called strange by others; however, from my perspective, they were the strange ones. Though my mother was my ideal, I was incapable of becoming her. I was unable to laugh off the hateful comments I got from others. I lacked the popularity to make acquaintances with others while conducting myself however I liked.

If anything, I wished I could become like everyone else. To be someone who

could read the room without having to be taught. To have common sense instilled in me. To be praised by adults. To lead a normal life. But I couldn't. I couldn't be like them. If I did, I would no longer be myself.

Was there a world out there where I wouldn't be persecuted for being myself, like in the light novels I'd read? Perhaps going to a new world was the best choice for me. I wondered if things would become easier for me if I was reincarnated into a new world.

I was completely aware of how pointless these thoughts and delusions were. They were simply a way to escape from reality, if only just a little. How silly of me. There was only one choice afforded to my middle school self, and that was to apply to a high school that none of my classmates would attempt to attend.

I'd heard that Kyoto University played host to a wide cast of unique characters. And as long as I was in a place that was essentially a gathering place for intellectuals, I'd thought I might find camaraderie with others who were similar to me. Perhaps then I'd be able to be like everyone else.

However, my hopes had been dashed. I'd anticipated a school with a cast of unique characters, but I was wrong. Nothing had changed. Everyone was the same as everywhere else, and I was the same as I'd always been.

Then, one day, I heard someone call out to me.

"You like this series too?" he asked.

This was when I met Mizuto-kun. He was the only person that failed to become upset with me. It didn't matter if I had common sense; even if I failed to read the room, he didn't yell at me. If I did anything strange, he informed me exactly what was strange about it. In fact, he'd said something stranger than anything that's ever come out of my mouth—that he wanted to be with me. To be my friend. Perhaps this was when I came to realize that someone as insignificant and lowly as me had no place troubling Mizuto-kun.

"I heard you and Irido-kun were hanging out in the library yesterday."

"For real? You two are so in love!"

The next day during lunch, the same girls from before came up and started

talking to me. I was truly happy that they did, but...I needed to make something clear.

“Let’s go eat! You can spill the deets over lunch.”

“P-Pardon!” I mustered every last bit of courage I had to blurt this out in a loud voice, stopping them in their tracks. I reflexively hung my head when they turned to look at me, but I knew what I needed to do. “T-Truthfully, Mi-Mizuto and I are...not dating.”

I said it. I managed to say it. At long last, the truth came out of my lips. I was not Mizuto-kun’s girlfriend. I was but the girl he’d decisively turned down—a complete and utter loser. *Now that you know, please leave Mizuto-kun... Please leave us alone.*

There were a few moments of silence as they tried to process what I’d said. After some time, the girl who was usually very considerate of me spoke up.

“Oh, you! No need to be embarrassed,” she said, lightly tapping my shoulder.

I doubted there was any malice behind her words. I was solely to blame for not being able to successfully express my thoughts this entire time. However, how was I supposed to when this was simply how I was?

“I-I’m being truthful!” I insisted in a louder voice than I’d intended.

The classroom fell silent, and I felt everyone’s piercing gazes fall on us. *I-I wasn’t aiming to sound upset. But I... No, I... I’m... I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.*

“I-I’m so sorry...” Despite this strong torrent of emotions inside me, I was only able to whisper these words.

I had no clue if they even heard what I’d said. Had my voice been at a level that others could just barely perceive?

“Oh...” She was clearly uncomfortable as she removed her hand from my shoulder. “Uh, my bad...”

With that, they left and began whispering to each other. Most likely, they were conversing about how I was unable to read the room.

I exhaled. It felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. After this outburst, I ignored my surroundings and exited the classroom. I needed to procure food for myself, since mother hadn't been able to make lunch for me today.

Mizuto Irido

"Where is she?"

As usual, I'd come to the library after classes had ended, but Higashira wasn't there yet. I took a look around the library, then sat in our usual spot and pulled out a book I was in the middle of reading. Was she being held up by class? Maybe she had to help with cleaning or something. Either way, she'd come sooner or later, so I decided to wait.

Before I knew it, I'd finished reading my book. *Huh?* I tilted my head. *What time is it?* I put my book back in my bag and pulled out my phone. *Five o'clock?!* It'd been over an hour and yet there was still no sign of her. There was no way that class or cleaning would've gone on for this long.

I checked my messages, but I didn't have anything from her. *What's going on? Is she sick?* Suddenly, I heard the librarian turn a page in her book. *It's that quiet? Wait.* I couldn't believe that I was noticing this now, but why *was* it so quiet? What happened to the gallery from yesterday? Had they lost interest? That was quick. I was grateful for their short attention span, but then the words that Higashira had muttered yesterday suddenly replayed in my head.

"How can you suggest that when you've never once seen what I'm like in my classroom?" she'd said.

That was the first time I'd seen her like that. That wasn't the Higashira I knew. The next moment, my phone chimed.

Izanami: Apologies, but I won't be joining you today.

Uh, a little late, don't you think? Either way, I immediately responded.

Mizuto: You okay? Catch a cold?

There was a beat between when she read my message and when she responded.

Izanami: I have other obligations. Apologies.

Something felt off. Why had it taken her so long to tell me this? Why were her messages so short? Usually, she'd follow up her messages with some kind of joke like "Yes, I'm ill. Would you please nurse me back to health?" But what nagged at me the most was her apologies.

Mizuto: Something happen in class?

After a few seconds she replied.

Izanami: No.

Izanami: I think it may be best if we do not meet for some time.

I furrowed my brow at her message.

Mizuto: Did they say something?

Mizuto: This isn't like you. Screw whatever other people say.

This time I got an immediate response.

Izanami: This is me.

Izanami: I apologize.

After that, she stopped responding, no matter what I sent.

I lay down on the living room couch and stared at the ceiling. I wasn't in the mood to read whatsoever. I just kept thinking back to her last message. If I tried reading, no matter what, I could only see the words she wrote. I couldn't focus on anything else, so I resorted to vacantly staring at the ceiling—but it was written there too.

"Uh... Are you okay?" Yume appeared above me as if she were blocking out the imaginary text on the ceiling. She peered down at me as she ran her fingers through her long black hair. "People have been talking about how you put her socks on for her. You should be a little more discreet. Your little nook in the library doesn't make you invisible, you kn—"

"Why."

Yume yelped a little from my sudden outburst and moved her face away. I was so angry. Everything got on my nerves. The entire world was pissing me off.

"Higashira and I have hung out in that same spot forever. Why do we have to turn tail and run now? Why do we have to hide?!"

"C-Calm down. What's going on?"

I froze as soon as I saw the confusion in Yume's face. I slowed my breathing and tried to calm myself, but I could still feel the anger seething inside me.

"Sorry."

"It's okay, but..." Yume continued staring at me. "Move over."

"Huh?"

"Just move over!" I made space at the edge of the couch and Yume immediately plopped herself down, looking straight at me. "Talk."

"What?"

"Tell me everything! Something happened with Higashira-san, right?"

"This has nothing to do with y—"

“I *knew* you’d say that, and I have a counter: anything to do with my family and friends has to do with me!”

I fell silent. I hadn’t expected her to have an argument prepared, much less for her to be *right*.

Yume’s expression softened as her voice turned gentle, not unlike a mother trying to comfort their crying child. “What’s wrong? Did something bad happen?”

“No...”

“Akatsuki-san told me that if there’s anyone who gets a big head and resorts to bullying, she’ll make them pay by any means possible.”

“What’s going on in that head of hers?” *Ugh. Fine.* I wasn’t about to let anyone “pay” over a misunderstanding.

“At the very least, nothing’s happened to me. Kawanami’s been playing bodyguard.”

“I know that. Did something happen to Higashira-san?”

“I...don’t know.” I furrowed my brow and put a finger on my temple. “From what Kawanami’s told me, Higashira’s not being bullied or anything. Some girls from her class talked to her. She’s told me as much too. But...” I proceeded to tell Yume about how Higashira hadn’t come to the library and about our text conversation. *I’m not holding anything back. I’m laying every last thing bare.* “I think she’s trying to be considerate, but I don’t understand why she’s doing that after she got over her rejection. Why should she care what other people think *now*?”

Yume let out a long, heavy sigh.

“Why are you sighing?” I asked, tilting my head.

“This’ll be the first time I’ll say something like this. It’s pretty vulgar, so I’d rather not, but I can’t think of any other way to get it through your thick skull.”

“Huh?”

Yume pointed at me, took a deep breath, and declared, “You absolute...virgin!!!” I froze. “What do you mean, ‘she got over her rejection’?”

What do you mean, ‘why should she care what other people think now’?! You don’t understand *anything*! Ugh, this is why I can’t *stand* virgins! You all have your delusions about women.”

“Uh...huh? Delusions?”

“Yeah! You’ve pushed all your ideals onto Higashira-san! Knowing how much you have your nose in a book, I’d say you’ve started losing touch with what’s real and what’s fiction. You secretly call her a femme fatale, don’t you?!”

“Like hell I do!” *Does this idiot think that every reader calls girls close to them “femme fatales”? What the hell kinda prejudice is this?!*

“Of *course* she cares what other people think!” Yume spat, both figuratively and literally, without a hint of shame. “Of *course* she cares about how she’s perceived, *especially* in relation to the person she likes!”

I had no words.

“Weren’t you annoyed when people found out about your hangout spot? Can you really say that it didn’t affect how you acted at all? Do you know how that made Higashira-san feel? Can you really say that you didn’t frighten the same girl who we know is cowardly and oblivious to others?”

I remembered Higashira flashing me a worried look. I’d tried to reassure her that everything was all right and I’d keep my promise to her. I began remembering the things she’d said to me.

“Hm? I don’t perceive myself as that calm of a person.”

“Are you rejecting my offer?”

“Are you bothered?”

Was she really okay? Was she not anxious about things? How well did I really, truly know Isana Higashira?

“She’s just a normal girl who’s head over heels for you. She tries to play the part of the person you think she is—a weirdo who doesn’t change how she acts despite what other people think. How else do you think she was able to go back to being friends with you so quickly? She’s been hiding her wounds from being rejected, and—”

“Thanks. That’s enough,” I said, interrupting Yume.

I was acutely aware of how oblivious I’d been. It was embarrassing. That being said, I was confident I hadn’t been underestimating her. Had she really been doing her best to match my image of her? Had she been hiding how she hurt while returning to being friends? I didn’t think so.

“Thanks for telling me what you think. You’ve been really helpful, but...I don’t believe you’re right about anything you said.”

“Why’s that?”

“If I had to say...it’s because I’m an annoying Higashira otaku.” Yume looked confused, but I continued. “The original is always the best.”

I heard the sound of someone picking up the phone.

“Hey,” I said.

“Mizuto-kun?”

“Why’d it take you so long to pick up?”

“Apologies. I was playing a game, and—”

“For four hours?”

“It’s typical for gaming,” she reasoned.

“Maybe I’m the weird one for trying to call you for four hours straight.”

“Yes...I wholeheartedly agree.”

“It’s late. I’m gonna just cut straight to the chase.”

“I wouldn’t mind idly chatting first.”

“Nah, I’m gonna keep things short and sweet today. I’ve misunderstood who you are, Higashira.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“I thought you were strong. That no matter how hurt you got, you’d easily recover and brush it off.”

“Oh, no. There is absolutely nobody weaker than I.”

“Yume said that you’re a normal girl and that you were just being the weird girl that I thought you were.”

“Hm... That may be true, but I am uncertain.”

“There’s something that doesn’t add up.”

“Oh? What might that be?”

“Do you remember back when I came to you for help when Yume was acting weird?”

“Oh, yes. If I remember correctly, I’d yet to formally be acquainted with Yume-san and the others.”

“Yep. And you said, ‘When I find that my rules are being threatened, I get very defensive, not unlike a chained-up feral animal. Allegedly, when that happens, I am unable to read the room.’”

“I don’t really remember, but maybe I did? I’m surprised you remember so clearly.”

“After hearing that, I thought you were strong. I thought you wouldn’t be swayed by what others thought. So, here’s the thing—why would someone like that try and match themselves to what I thought of them?”

“I doubt I put too much thought into my selection of words. I may have been parroting something I’d read in a light novel.”

“Yeah, maybe. But do you remember my response? I said, ‘Being able to read the room is important, but not when it comes to me.’”

She fell silent.

“Do you remember?”

“I do...”

“Did you forget that? Or did you ignore what I said on purpose?”

“I’m unsure. I *do* remember it, at this point in time, but on occasion, certain things fall out of my memory.”

“Like when you asked me out?”

“Huh?”

“Do you remember what I said after you obtusely suggested that we walk home together?”

Silence again.

“Do you?” I repeated.

“I do now...” This time it was *my* turn to be silent. “If I was unable to recall your words, there was no way I could’ve said what I did.”

“To be honest, I can’t remember what I said.”

“In that case, you really are the kind of person I think you are. You read the situation in my stead and were cautious of your treatment towards me.”

“Yeah.”

“I felt as if I’d found salvation back then, but at the same time, I was miserable.”

“Why?”

“Heh heh. I was surprised I’d suggested it. Oh, how miserable I was...”

“You’re crazy. I was impressed by how amazing you were. I don’t think I’ve ever respected anyone as much as I did you in that moment.”

“You’re overestimating me. If anything, *you’re* the amazing one. You’re a wonderful person who’s not only strong but also rather forward. I wish I could be like you.” I didn’t know what to say. “I yearned to be someone who was strong and could stand on their own two feet without using friends as a crutch—just like Hachiman Hikigaya or Kiyotaka Ayanokoji or Tatsuya Shiba. Isn’t that much more impressive? I wanted to be a person with the same incredible fortitude as those protagonists. If it was possible to achieve a personality like theirs, I wanted to live my life in the pursuit of becoming like them.”

I stayed silent and continued to listen.

“But, it turns out, I am incapable of pursuing that life—of walking in their footsteps. I am neither strange nor normal. I’m just oblivious to social cues and the feelings of others. There is absolutely nothing special about me. I am simply

lacking in every regard. I've no hidden talents up my sleeve. I'm merely an outcast." I stayed silent. "For instance, today was a magnificent example of how oblivious I am. I'm aware you have no desire to take a reprieve from spending time together. Though we'd planned to not come out and say anything decisive...I clearly informed my classmates that we are not in a relationship. I continue to repeat the same mistakes without ever learning. Despite being cognizant of what I'm doing and what it will result in, I choose the incorrect decision regardless."

I still couldn't say anything.

"Even now, at this very moment. Why have I entered into this extended monologue? I will most certainly regret this decision later. I will be writhing around in agony, praying that I can wipe this from my memory. Even so, I am not stopping myself. I'm unable to read the room. My inability to comprehend my surroundings is completely my fault. Ehe heh heh. Even when others call me strange...truthfully, I grow a little joyful. If I truly am as strange as they claim, I wouldn't be happy that they were calling me that. It's quite a banal idea, if I do say so myself."

Still, I didn't say anything.

"It turns out that no matter what I do, it's always a half-baked attempt. Whether it's drawing, writing, or streaming—each time, I've halted before showing anyone. But perhaps it's not entirely my fault. After all, the internet is a gathering ground for individuals even stranger than I. Compared to them, I may as well be nothing."

Still, I didn't say anything.

"However, Mizuto-kun, you're the real deal. You truly are strange. I yearn to be like you—to be with you. That's why..."

Still, I didn't say anything.

"That's why..."

"You fell for me?" I asked.

"No."

I fell silent again.

“No. That... The circumstances behind that are different. I swear. That was in all likelihood...”

A silence followed, shared by the two of us. I was the first to break it.

“Higashira...”

“Yes?”

“Mind if I talk about my past a little?”

“Go ahead.”

“My favorite book in middle school was *Dogra Magra*. It was known as being one of Japan’s top three strangest books. I liked the idea of that, so I wanted to read it. But in the end, I barely understood what was going on.”

“Wow...” she said, concerned.

“Around that time, I got a girlfriend. Her favorite genre was mystery, and she was *really* into them. She was pretty unfiltered when it came to her opinion on mystery titles and would disparage anything that contradicted Knox’s Ten Commandments.”

“Wow...” she said in an even more concerned voice.

“What I’m trying to say is that both of us were normal middle schoolers. We were a normal couple. We were so unremarkable that the likes of us would never make it into a story.” I waited for her to respond, but she stayed silent.

“Honestly, I don’t think ‘weird’ people exist, Higashira. Everyone’s normal.”

“My mother has stated the opposite.”

“If everyone’s weird, though, doesn’t that make it normal to be weird?”

“I...suppose.”

“Anyone who claims they’re a normal high schooler is actually the weirdest of them all.”

“There are many protagonists like that.”

“If there are, then they’re normal.”

“So does that make every human on this planet normal?”

“Humans aren’t special. Every last one of us is just a normal protagonist.”

“Are you perhaps quoting something?”

“Maybe. I’m just a normal person, after all.”

The line filled with silence for a moment before Higashira spoke again.

“Even so...you really are a strange person, Mizuto-kun.”

“Takes one to know one.”

“I-I’m not as strange as you, though.”

“You’re overevaluating me.”

“Then, please prove it to me—prove that you’re normal.” I paused in thought while she continued. “If you truly *are* normal...then you’re not too different from me. I require proof.”

“Sure.”

“The fact that you can give an immediate, affirmative reply is not normal.”

“It is.”

“How, exactly?”

“I just read the room and decided to say those words.” Higashira lightly giggled at my response. “That funny?”

“No, it’s just... What you did is something at the level of what I am capable of as well.”

Isana Higashira

I ended the call and gazed at the ceiling in my room. Would this be considered an argument? Had I just had an argument with my friend? A great deal of self-loathing overcame me, not merely from deriving joy from something so trivial, but the very same act of deriving joy as well.

Normal people would not enjoy this situation. Therefore, I was strange. Regardless, I knew that deep inside, I preferred being this way. Truly, I was

illogical and ever so lame, to the point of excess.

There wasn't a chance that Mizuto-kun and I were the same. He was intelligent, unyielding to the influence of others, and resolute about who he was as a person. He'd claimed that he'd prove we were the same, but by saying that, he'd only further reinforced the idea that he was anything but normal.

Certainly, that kind of person exists. However, that archetype did not suit me. I wrapped my body in a blanket and curled up into a ball. I was positive that if I were to be transported to a different world, I'd be incapable of doing anything.

The following day, I ate lunch by myself and went home as soon as classes concluded. I did not meet up with Mizuto-kun.

The following day, there was no school, so I lazed about in bed. I did not meet up with Mizuto-kun.

The following day, there was no school, so I lazed about in bed. I gazed at the drawing of Mizuto-kun that I'd done the other day. I did not meet up with Mizuto-kun.

The following day, I ate lunch by myself and went home as soon as classes concluded. I did not meet up with Mizuto-kun.

The following day, I ate lunch by myself and went home as soon as classes concluded. I gazed at the drawing of Mizuto-kun that I'd done the other day. I did not meet up with Mizuto-kun.

The following day, the committee for the school's cultural festival was decided. My class began a discussion regarding our contribution. No longer were my classmates discussing Mizuto-kun and me.

A week had passed, and I was planning to eat lunch by myself today as well,

when...

“Higashira.”

I heard someone call out to me from close proximity.

“Higashira, I know you can hear me.” I nervously looked up, and standing right in front of my seat was Mizuto-kun. “I’m here to get you.”

My eyes darted around the classroom. It’d been a while since I’d truly perceived the classroom, and now everyone inside, and even people in the hallway, were currently focused curiously on Mizuto-kun and me.

“It’s all right,” he said in his usual tone of voice. “Sure, I hate being the center of attention, but...” He seemed very embarrassed when he spoke these words. “I hate not being able to spend time with you even more.”

The entire classroom fell silent. *Oh. Hm? Huh?!* It took a few moments before I fully comprehended his words.



As soon as I realized what he'd said, my heart began beating uncontrollably. My face felt as if it had been set aflame. The girls in the classroom began squealing excitedly.

"Oh my *gawd!*"

"I want someone to say that to me!"

"Oh god, my heart! I can't!"

The girls in our class were in an uproar, with several of them practically fainting. *Um, huh? Uh, he was speaking to me, right?* He'd spoken so boldly in front of all these people... He truly wasn't a normal person.

And then my eyes opened. It had all been a dream—or perhaps more accurately, a nightmare. I had no further desire to sleep or view the rest of that dream, so I decided to get up.

The way Mizuto-kun had acted in my dream... The real him could potentially do something like that. It would make me quite happy—that's for sure. Perhaps that kind of grand ending was within the realm of possibility. He'd boldly enter my classroom to get me, cause everyone to burst with surprise, and then we'd depart together. How marvelous that would be. I'd love to experience that scenario. That being said, he could do it *because* he was Mizuto-kun.

"Isana, wake your ass up!"

"Ah! I-I'm awake! I'm awake!"

Yet another day of school that I would attend as incredibly normally as I usually would.

Both lunch period and classes ended without incident. *I...will not go to the library today*, I decided. Truthfully, there had been one day that I peeked into the library because I couldn't hold myself back any longer, and I saw that Mizuto-kun was not in our usual place. He had no need to try so hard to follow my request to provide proof that he was normal and not too different from me.

Nobody was interested in our relationship anymore. There shouldn't have

been any need to put distance between us, but regardless, he was trying to faithfully fulfill that trivial request I'd made over the phone. For some reason. Well, I say that, but in truth, I knew why—because of our friendship.

I'd have been perfectly content if he'd ignored what I'd said and we'd reverted to our typical mannerisms—conversing in the library and spending time at his home on days we didn't have school. That would be perfectly fine with me. I'd only said those words as a retaliation against his statement.

I covertly retrieved my tablet from my bag and gazed at the picture I'd drawn of Mizuto the other day when he'd come over to my house. I hadn't drawn any clothes. My depiction of him was much more muscular than he truly was. I had attempted on numerous occasions to draw his private parts; however, I was always struck with self-hate and guilty feelings. I felt that way about the picture in general, though. Every time I viewed it, I felt a huge sense of regret.

I'm sorry. I wanted to apologize for impulsively saying something so strange. Please forget it. Please laugh it off. Please don't take my words to heart. Please be as oblivious to those words as I am to social cues and situations. That would be sufficient for me. Even if you no longer look in my direction or feel any certain way towards me, as long as I can continue having feelings for you, that would be sufficient.

I exhaled slightly in an attempt to shift my negative thoughts in a more positive direction. I deleted the drawing and returned my tablet to my bag, shutting the clasp after I was done. *I suppose I'll be on my way now. Perhaps I'll make a stop at a bookstore. There may be some new releases being sold early.*

Suddenly, the classroom grew raucous. *What's going on?* Whatever it was, it shouldn't have had anything to do with me.

"Higashira." I heard someone call out to me. *Huh? Am I experiencing aftereffects from the dream from this morning? I cannot believe I'm experiencing an auditory hallucination of Mizuto-kun's voice. This is crazy, even for me.* "Higashira, I know you can hear me." *Am I...not hallucinating?* I nervously looked up and began to think that I was experiencing a visual hallucination as well. However...this was reality. Mizuto-kun was standing in front of my desk.

I felt my throat dry up. This was not a dream. It was unmistakably reality.

“Wh-Why...?” Why are you here? Why are you boldly standing here in front of all these people? Aren’t you supposed to prove that you’re the same as me? Why are you pulling such a remarkable feat? You’re making me remember how shallow a person I am!

However, Mizuto-kun remained the same—unbelievably cool, strange, true to his promise, and standing right in front of me. *I knew it. I knew Mizuto-kun was a liar. However, I’m fond of Mizuto-kun, so I will forgive him. Yes. This is the Mizuto-kun I became fond of, so—*

“Here.”

“Huh?”

He lay a few pieces of folded up loose-leaf papers on my desk. *Huh? Why didn’t he say, “I’ve come to get you”? Where’s the “it’s all right”? Wasn’t he supposed to say these cool words and make the girls in the class faint?*

“Okay. Later,” he practically mumbled before hurriedly leaving the classroom, as if fleeing from the piercing glares surrounding him.

His actions certainly resembled—but also did not resemble—those of the Mizuto-kun in my dream. My classmates seemed confused, but they quickly returned to whatever conversations they’d been having prior to his entrance, as if nothing had happened. The only proof that he’d come in here were the papers he’d left on my desk. *Were these...the proof he was talking about? After a full week of nothing...what could these pieces of paper possibly prove? I nervously unfolded them and began reading.*

I giggled a little and continued reading. I chuckled some more as I grew more engrossed. When I finally finished, I burst into a fit of uncontrollable laughter. The classroom fell silent again and all their confused eyes focused on me. *Oh no, I forgot that I’m still in the classroom. What a blunder.* But this was inconsequential, in the end.

I steadied my breathing and held the pieces of paper against my chest, threw my bag over my shoulder, and stood up. I left the classroom, quickly walked through the halls, and headed for the place where Mizuto-kun would be—class

1-7.

I entered through the already open door without any hesitation. There were still a great number of students inside, but I paid them no heed. Mizuto-kun was the only reason I was here—no one else mattered.

“Higashira-san?” I thought I heard Yume-san’s voice, but I decided to address her at a later time.

I slipped in between people until I stood in front of Mizuto-kun’s desk, just as he’d done to me not too long ago.

“Mizuto-kun.” He looked up as I called his name. I almost found it amusing how serene and calm his cute face was. I placed the papers on his desk and decided to tell him my thoughts of what he’d written.

“What an incredibly uninteresting tale!”

This was the first time I’d ever given a scathing review, though I was in the most refreshed mood possible. On the papers he’d given me was a handwritten, nonsensical story with self-absorbed prose and incoherent monologue that did absolutely nothing to entice the reader. Furthermore, it had no discernible ending!

It was the kind of story that would’ve lost in the first round if it was submitted for a rookie author award. If he were to self-publish it online, it wouldn’t receive even ten likes. That was the state of Mizuto-kun’s short story.

I could confidently say that what I’d written was much, much more entertaining. I was surprised. How could Mizuto-kun—someone who read a wide range of books—produce such an archetypal, ego-stroking novel? Or perhaps he’d written it like that on purpose?

Mizuto-kun awkwardly looked away. “I had a feeling you’d say that, but I hadn’t accounted for you to say it so giddily. Kinda hurts...”

“So you were already aware of its value?”

“Not exactly. Someone just...had reading dibs on it.”

“*Reading dibs*”? What kind of person could he have deemed worthy of showing his story to? Then I saw Yume-san giving the pieces of paper a look of

disgust. *Oh, it seems she's the one who had dibs and shared her evaluation of it with him.*

"For the record, this was a genuine attempt at writing. It took me an entire week to fill just these few pages. I seriously respect the people online who can post something daily."

"I suppose with your level of writing, frequency would be praiseworthy. After all, operating with moderation is reserved for the talented."

"You really aren't pulling any punches... When I finished writing it, I was really worried about it being so good that it'd have the opposite effect on you..." Mizuto-kun grumbled, truly down in the dumps.

Seeing this truly relieved me. Mother's statement was indeed incorrect...but not entirely. People aren't too different from one another. Even so, they all perceive others as strange. That's why everyone wants to feel peace of mind—for everyone to seem the same. To be understood, and to understand one another.

The ability to do so was cooperation. The methodology was common sense. The relationship was society. In that case, I should proudly discard cooperation. I should proudly adopt the opposite of common sense. I should diverge from society. I should become a girl that anyone would perceive as strange. After all, what else was someone who's incapable of reading the room supposed to do?

I was mostly confident that it would be all right. Even if I stumbled again, I was sure it would be all right. After all...

"Mizuto-kun."

To me, Mizuto-kun was neither normal nor strange. Even if he was uncooperative, didn't employ common sense, or failed to conform to society, I was comfortable in his presence just as he was. I saw him as someone similar to me. I knew who he was.

"I like you, Mizuto-kun."



He was the only him in the world. He was special.

“Yeah.” A soft smile formed on Mizuto-kun’s face. “I like you too,” my best friend, who was more normal yet stranger than I, responded in turn.

Indeed. He was my best friend. That was the term for this kind of special friend.

Mizuto-kun and I walked side by side as we made our way to the library. I noticed that we were drawing looks, but I paid them no mind. However, I felt slightly enthused. *This is my best friend! Envious, are you not?* Ultimately, I was very keen on flaunting that which I was proud of.

As we continued, I slightly leaned forward and peered up at his face. “By the way, Mizuto-kun, isn’t it about time you called me by my first name?”

“Huh?”

“I think it’s about time you call me by my first name, as I do to you.”

It was unnatural that we were best friends and yet only I called him by his first name. I’d previously suggested this; however, he’d always been noncommittal and showed no sign that he’d stop dragging his feet and adopt the idea. Thus, I was not going to let him run away this time.

He made a pained expression. “I thought we decided to keep things the same.”

“My wish was for you to remain the same Mizuto-kun that I’ve come to desire. The Mizuto-kun I desire calls me by my first name, Isana.”

“Why are you going all galaxy brain now...?” Mizuto-kun began opening his mouth as if he was about to say something before closing it and looking away. Finally, I heard him say it in a very soft voice. “I...sana.”

“Once more!”

“Isa...na.”

“A little louder!”

“Isana! Happy now, Isana?! That better be good enough, Isana!”

“A-A-Ah! W-Wai— Y-You’re overloading me!”

I hadn’t expected this reversal from Mizuto-kun, who was now snorting and averting his gaze out of embarrassment. As he did, a light bulb went off in my head, and a grin crept across my face. He was always making me frantic, so perhaps it was my turn to reverse our positions.

“Mizuto-kun, I’ve read into various social cues, and there’s something I noticed which I’ve kept quiet about.”

“Reading social cues? *You?*”

“Yume-san is your ex, correct?”

Mizuto-kun stopped moving. His expression froze. “Wha... What?”

I widely grinned after seeing his reaction. “Mizuto-kun, you should not underestimate me so much,” I chided, walking away with a spring in my step.

After a little, I heard the sound of his frantic steps as he attempted to catch up to me.

“W-Wait, y-you— How long—?”

“How long indeed? I shall leave that to your imagination.”

Yume-san and Mizuto-kun were much bigger fools than I was. Did they really expect someone like me to be able to act as if I didn’t know their secret until they revealed it?

The Ex-Couple Confer

Yume Irido The rumors surrounding Higashira-san and Mizuto had continued to spread like wildfire. They'd honestly taken on a life of their own and began romanticizing the two's close friendship. According to Akatsuki-san, sooner or later, the entertainment factor of their relationship would fade and become just another public secret buried in our everyday lives.

I was happy that things would calm down, though my own problems weren't solved whatsoever. Everything that had started because of mom's misunderstanding about Mizuto and Higashira-san's relationship had yet to be cleared up. Now that the rumor had spread across our school, there was pretty much nothing that I could do.

While Mizuto and Higashira-san more or less were able to continue on and ignore the people around them, I couldn't. They might not have tried to conform to the school social order, but I did. I had my own standing and image to uphold. I was essentially a public figure, and if there were any rumors about me approaching Mizuto and trying to steal him from her, that'd spell the end for me.

I mean, this was Mizuto we were talking about—the guy whose pride was as tall as Mount Everest. For the sole purpose of allaying Higashira-san's fears, he wrote a story despite never doing so before, had even gone through the trouble of showing it to me, and went directly to her class to give it to her. That was the truth.

There was all that...and then there was what he had said to her.

"I like you too."

He'd said that in a public place where everyone could hear him. *I know!* I know that he didn't mean "like" in a romantic sense. I was completely aware of that! But I couldn't stop thinking about the "what if." What if he actually got serious about her?

His rejection was in the past. There was no room to doubt how strong their bond was. Honestly, it exceeded the level of actual couples. They were so connected to one another that they didn't even need to confess in the first place. They were *that* close.

Even if they didn't think the emotion between them was love, it didn't change the fact that there was no space for me to insert myself between them. Although, I guess it went without saying that I'd indirectly given them a push this time. *Hm? Wait. That's weird...* Ever since I'd decided that I was going to get him to fall for me, I couldn't help but feel that I'd been shooting myself in the foot.

"Hngh..." I groaned. *What have I done? Seriously.*

I began rolling around on the couch, groaning, and in the midst of that, I heard the house door open. Someone had come home. As I got up, I saw Mizuto enter the living room, still in his school uniform.

"Hey, you're back late."

"Yeah, me and Isana stopped somewhere."

"Oh, I see."

Mizuto went to the refrigerator, brought out some barley tea, drank it, exhaled, left the living room, and went up the stairs to his room. Well, it was good that everything seemed like it'd gone back to normal. Mizuto was hanging out with Isana without restra— *Hm?! "Isana"?! I shakily pulled out my phone and called Akatsuki-san.*

"A-Akatsuki-san! Akatsuki-san! Mizuto, h-he—"

"Whoa! What's wrong, Yume-chan?! Something happen?!"

"M-Mizuto, M-Mizuto, M-Mizuto!"

"Can you slow down for a sec? I'm trying not to address you saying his name without honorifics!"

"That's exactly it! Dropping honorifics!"

"Huh? I've known about that for a while now."

“You’ve known about Mizuto dropping honorifics and calling Higashira-san by her first name for a while?”

“Hm? Wait. Say that again?”

“Mizuto is calling Higashira-san by her first name.”

“Wait, no. I didn’t know that.”

“He *just* called her Isana!”

“Huh? Really? Wow, didn’t think he’d ever call a girl by their first name without any honorifics...” *I didn’t either! He never even called me by my first name when we were dating!* “So, their families think they’re dating, everyone at school thinks they’re dating, and now he’s calling her by her first name?”

“What am I supposed to do?! Akatsuki-san! What am I—”

“Yume-chan.”

“Yeah?”

“You had a good run.”

“Don’t give up on me!”

Mizuto Irido When I went into my room, the first thing I did wasn’t change, but pull out my phone. I opened the group chat app that I’d been told about in advance and entered a voice channel.

“Hello? I just got back,” I said.

“Agh! How are you ledge trapping so well?!”

“Lag means nothing when you’re so easy to read. And jump!”

“Agh!!!”

“Why are you guys playing Smash?”

“Ha ha. Loser! So bad!” I heard Isana Higashira repeating elementary school level taunts at Kogure Kawanami, who was groaning with frustration.

After meeting up for a bit at school, we’d all gone straight home. I was surprised that these two were already online. *That was fast.* It wasn’t clear whether they hadn’t been able to hold a conversation or they’d gotten into a

fight. Either way, they'd probably decided to use a game to settle things. Why was I having a conversation with this odd group of people? Well...

"Irido! There's no reason for you to rely on this girl with absolutely no social manners! If you need romantic advice, I'm more than enough!" Kawanami shouted.

"I don't remember asking anyone for advice," I said, shrugging. "Isana was the one who said that."

"Huh?! Why would the girl you rejected want to help give you romantic advice? She's gotta be playin' some kinda game here."

Isana shook her head. "Do I really seem like the kind of person to formulate such a plot? I am not that intelligent!"

"Does it not hurt you to admit that?" I asked.

"Okay, then what's going on? What the hell do you get out of helping Irido with his romantic life?" Kawanami demanded.

"Well, please imagine, if you will, that while we are spending time together, he suddenly stares off into the distance and an expression of deep pondering appears. Wouldn't that bother you to no end?!"

"Oh... Yeah, it would."

Have I ever made an expression like that?

"So I ask that you assist with his reunion with his ex or his moving on. I will do my utmost to exercise consideration!"

"Have *you* ever been considerate?" I asked.

"Yeah," Kawanami added. "You sure you're not using this as a guise to shoot your shot with him? She may look harmless, but she's scheming!"

"Why do you think you were invited, you gaudy guy? With you on this call, Yume-san won't misinterpret matters."

"Not sure about that. There are a lotta different ways. Like—"

"Mizuto-kun, would you like to begin practice, using me as your romantic

partner?”

“Hey! You! Stop that!” Kawanami screamed.

“I believed that’s where you were heading with this.”

Isana ignored Kawanami as he screamed intimidatingly into the mic. She’d be cowering if this were in person, but over a voice call, she was unchained.

“Well, returning to the topic at hand, we should consider how Yume-san feels in actuality. Is she bogged down by her lingering feelings like Mizuto-kun is?” Isana asked.

“Probably.”

“Oh, you’re joking.”

“Oh, you jest.”

“Why are you two so in sync right now?” I exhaled and decided that now would probably be a good time to lay out my honest, unfiltered opinion. “I’m not sure. She seems like she’s interested, but also like she’s just teasing me. There’s also the chance that I’m just reading into things too much. She’s too different from the girl I used to date. I honestly have no clue.”

“She’s totally into you,” Kawanami said. “But I’m just saying this looking in from the outside.”

“Hm... I understand it might be strange for me to comment this way, especially since I’m the one who brought up the subject—but does it really matter?”

“Huh?” Kawanami and I reacted to her irresponsible statement.

Though we weren’t on video, I could visualize Isana puffing out her chest and boldly declaring her next words. “Regardless of whether she is attracted to you, so long as you whisper sweet nothings to her, she’ll have no choice but to fall for you. There is absolutely no room for hesitation!”

We all fell silent. Her suggestion was so unexpected to me that it took a while for me to process it. But after a while, Kawanami burst out laughing.

“Oh, okay! Okay! I get it. You’re right. It really doesn’t matter. She’s got me

there, Irido! Bah ha ha!”

“Uh, no. Wait. This isn’t so simple.”

“Please rest assured! I, Isana Higashira, am a professional among professionals when it comes to falling head over heels for you, Mizuto-kun. I will assist in making you into the perfect version of yourself that will have Yume-san all over you! After we are successful, we can spend time together without you experiencing any anxiety about the future!”

“Why the hell would he keep hanging out with you if they got back together? Are you stupid?”

“Mizuto-kun is not as closed-minded as you may assume. Perhaps *you* are the idiot?”

“You wanna go? Huh?!”

“Would you like to have at it? Huh?!”

The two of them began breaking down into a fight again, leaving me to heave a heavy sigh.

“I thought romance was a pain in the ass, but you two really take the cake.”

Afterword

Typically, the afterword is supposed to include supplementary reading material, just like how strategy guides for games and paperback books have a space to break things down, but it was a little too difficult to do that this time. To be honest, I wish I had one. This is all the doing of a certain troublemaker, Isana Higashira.

In the second volume, I was given the suggestion to insert some of Isana's monologues every now and then, but I ultimately rejected it because I wanted to keep her character mysterious, someone who was simultaneously filled with mystery and ideals. Once the box is open, it can never be closed. Similarly, once more is known about her, she can never go back to being mysterious.

Just as a simple accident or emotional trick can make for a very enticing locked-room murder, there's a similar charm to the unknown. We wanted the readers to be in the same mindset as Mizuto, with a sense of knowing what exactly is going on while being completely wrong. In the end, I was in the same boat. I didn't know either.

I've said this many times before, but I don't have a clear idea how this story will progress. I don't know the characters' thoughts or motivations behind their actions until I actually begin writing. That's precisely what happened with Isana in this volume. When I finished my first draft, I received a comment saying that something wasn't quite right.

Those of you who read the original probably know that Isana's nightmare used to be the climax. As I was trying to make the early deadline for the special edition, I told my editor exactly how many pages I'd written.

That was when Isana told me something wasn't quite right. But what? I had no clue. All I knew was something was wrong. Would it have killed her to be more specific if she wanted something changed? Did she even know how down to the wire this was? I only had three days left until the deadline. I began racking my brains until I felt sick about what could possibly have been wrong,

and ultimately, I got a break. Mizuto saving her like some kind of superhero was a misinterpretation of his character. Otakus really just don't get it, do they?

I'd like to extend a big thanks to the illustrator, TakayaKi, Rei Kusakabe—who is in charge of the manga—my editor at Kadokawa Sneaker Bunko, the cast members of the drama CD, and everyone who has supported this series. But I'd also like to say a special “screw you” to the pandemic.

So anyway, this has been Volume 5 of *My Stepmom's Daughter is My Ex: The Only You in The World* by Kyosuke Kamishiro. Why is Yume-san so intent on playing the role of the heroine who loses out?

My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

"The Only You in the World"





There she was,
sitting on her
messy bed, when
she let out a
groan—the same
kind one makes
when they're
taking their first
stretch of the day
after waking up.

She wasn't
trying to flash
her belly or
anything—no,
she was
definitely
trying to take
off her shirt.

Then, she
gripped the
hem of her
t-shirt with
both hands
and pulled it
up.



Author
Kyosuke
Kamishiro

Illustrator
TakayaKi



5

My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

"The Only You in the World"

My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

"The Only You in the World"



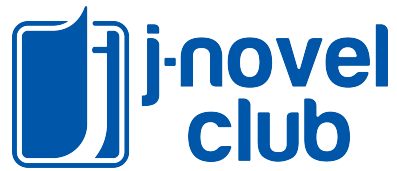


There she was, sitting on her messy bed, when she let out a groan—the same kind one makes when they're taking their first stretch of the day after waking up.

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My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex: Volume 5

by Kyosuke Kamishiro

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